

# The Syonan Symphony Orchestra: A Case of Musical Collaboration in Wartime Singapore

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*The arts always have a role in society, even in times of extreme crises such as war. During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore (1942-1945), the Syonan Symphony Orchestra was formed, providing succour and entertainment on a regular basis to locals and Japanese troops. The author delves into this little-documented entity and proposes that music was also a tool for survival during this extraordinary period in Singapore's history.*

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Perhaps nowhere is the truth of the phrase “Music has charms to soothe a savage beast” put on trial more than during wartime where complex and ambiguous relationships between conqueror and conquered are played out on a daily basis.

In popular culture—albeit inspired by true-life incidents—film buffs would no doubt recall the scene from the 2002 Oscar-winning biopic *The Pianist* set in World War II Poland where the protagonist plays the piano for a German officer who would subsequently offer him protection or the 1997 *Paradise Road*, where a performance by a choir formed by women prisoners-of-war in Sumatra brought forth momentary transformation within their Japanese conquerors.

Closer to home there is the Syonan Symphony Orchestra—also variously referred to as Syonan Kokkaido Orchestra, Syonan Orchestra, Augmented Syonan Orchestra—that was formed during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore from 1942-45. The “packed out-shows given every Sunday afternoon” by the orchestra throughout the occupation—as recalled by well-known conductor and Cultural Medallion recipient Paul Abisheganaden (1914-2011)—made it “the epitome of live entertainment during those war years.” The word *Syonan* (Japanese: Light of the South) refers to the Japanese name for Singapore during the war.

Yet, the impetus behind the founding of this ensemble remains cloaked in some mystery and its origins may not have been as innocent as just music having its charms to soothe a savage beast.

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In a 2005 research paper titled *A Narrative History of Music 1819 to Present*, musicologist and educator Eugene Dairianathan observes that “One of the most interesting spaces for further discourse is during one of the most traumatic periods of Singapore’s history, the Japanese Occupation. Although coverage was given to Western arts music activities during the Japanese Occupation in the *Syonan Shimbun* and although individual memoirs have made passing reference to such activities, little has been made out of these brief accounts.”

Indeed.

Excepting oral history interviews by the National Archives of Singapore (NAS) and accounts in memoirs (both by civilians and former prisoners of war), little has been written by historians or musicologists on musical development in Singapore during the occupation.

Cultural Medallion recipient, educator, and guitarist Alex Abisheganaden was perhaps among the first to bring public attention the role of music (and mention of the Syonan Symphony Orchestra) during the war. In an article on musical development in Singapore for *The Straits Times* published on 9 August 1982, Alex Abisheganaden recalled that “during the war

years, the Victoria Theatre (then named Syonan Kokaido [sic]) was the venue for weekly concerts by the Syonan Tokubetusi [sic] Orchestra with Walter Rayman as leader-conductor.”

The orchestra, recalled Alex Abisheganaden, comprised the “best European and local musicians” and gave two concerts each Sunday. He noted that the theatre was “always packed for both concerts” and in addition to a monthly pay, the musicians were given “one *kati* of rice, half *kati* of sugar and five packets of Koa cigarettes!”

In Paul Kratoska’s *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya and Singapore, 1941-45: A Social and Economic History*, brief mention is given to the importance the Japanese placed on music. He highlighted that the Japanese were aware of how “music wielded ‘considerable influence on the sentiments of a people’” and that the Japanese government subsequently imposed a ban on some 1,000 American and British compositions in January 1943. Kratoska however makes no mention of the orchestra.

Writing in 2010 on a survey of music in Singapore from the 1920s to 2000s for the National Library Board, Loretta Marie Perera and Audrey Perera found that during the war years, “the music climate took on a new direction”.

The Pereras observed that a need for musical entertainment provided by amateur musicians for Japanese soldiers had—within the period of the war—enabled some amateurs to turn professional and make a living from their music.

Of the orchestra however, all that is stated is that “Japan’s Syonan Kokkaido Orchestra performed at its headquarters in Victoria Theatre, as well as at Cathay Cinema and the Japanese military camps. Prisoners and the public got to watch these performances as well.”

To date, perhaps the two most extensive accounts of music in this period available to the public is possibly still that of Eugene Dairianathan’s research paper (for which this writer served as Dairianathan’s assistant researcher) and Paul Abisheganaden’s autobiographical *Notes Across the Years: Anecdotes from a Musical Life* from 2005.

Dairianathan attempts a chronology of the events from 1942-45 with lengthy excerpts from the *Syonan Shimbun* while Paul Abisheganaden’s chapter entitled “The Japanese Occupation and Return of the British” in his abovementioned memoirs is a detailed account based on his personal experience. His account is invaluable for personal insights and encounters with the lives of various musicians involved in the orchestra: musicians who have remained largely forgotten and of whom little is known.

Yet, despite all of the above, little has been made out of these brief accounts.

Who *actually* founded the Syonan Symphony Orchestra? Why was it founded? How was it managed? Who was in the orchestra? What did music mean for the members of the orchestra and finally, what impact did the orchestra have on musicians who lived through the occupation?

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“... two events of  
musical interest to those  
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Despite various accounts by Singaporeans who performed in the orchestra, until sources (if at all available) in other languages (Japanese, Chinese and Hungarian) come to light, it would be difficult to ascertain the exact origins of the Syonan Symphony Orchestra.

The reason is simple: accounts vary as to who was involved in the orchestra and the roles they played.

These differing accounts can easily be explained by the fact that musicians who performed in the orchestra were either not privy to details of the organisation and management of the orchestra or the element of fear prevented them from wanting to know more.

As former teacher and school principal Gay Wan Guay (1915-1985), who performed with the orchestra as a violinist, said in his 1983 oral history interview with NAS when asked about the origins of the orchestra: "... As I said, in those days, I don't know, as far as I was concerned, mind your own business. You are asked to do this, you liked to do this, you do and get out of trouble. That's it."

One common assumption about the origins of the ensemble, as found in most accounts, was that the orchestra was an initiative of the Japanese administration.

In his memoirs, Paul Abisheganaden states that "It did not take long for the Japanese authorities to establish a small theatre orchestra, the Syonan Kokkaido Orchestra, with its headquarters at the old Victoria Theatre. They sent out a band conductor from Japan called Watanabe."

Paul Abisheganaden further elaborates that a Hungarian musician by the name of "Paul Gerentzer"<sup>1</sup> was engaged as a "manager of the orchestra" who subsequently "roped in other foreign musicians, and together with all available local musicians, the group played under the direction of Mr Watanabe."

Paul Abisheganaden's younger brother Alex, in his abovementioned article for *The Straits Times*

however stated that Gerentser was the manager of the Victoria Theatre during this period.

Regardless, it seemed Gerentser brought more than his management skills to the orchestra. Paul Abisheganaden noted that—and also evident from reports in the *Syonan Shimbun* and house programmes of the orchestra—in order to "brighten the programme" of the concerts, Gerentser's wife "recruited a few young ladies and train [sic] them as dancers who joined her in dances choreographed to popular light classical music." These efforts "provided much unexpected excitement and attractive diversity to the orchestral items of the programme."

Paul Gerentser however was not the only name which emerged in connection with the orchestra. Czech musician, David Samuel Apelbaum, was also often mentioned.

Apelbaum, who died in 1967 in Singapore, was a pianist and piano teacher who after the war set up Petrof Piano House & Favourite Radio, which imported Petrof pianos from the former Czechoslovakia while serving as an agency for a Czech radio receiver.

Music educator Benjamin Khoo, in his oral history interview with NAS, also attributed the founding of the orchestra to the Japanese administration and recalled the orchestra being led by Apelbaum.

For Khoo, this orchestra was one of "two events of musical interest to those who are music lovers" during the war. Khoo, who played the violin in the orchestra, recalled that Apelbaum "took over" and "we managed somehow to organise an orchestra together, which may not be a complete orchestra but still it's something that we could be proud of ..."

Khoo further recalled that the orchestra was started a year after the Japanese Occupation and it functioned for the next two years.

Apelbaum was also mentioned by Gay in his oral history interview when he spoke about his experiences in the orchestra where he performed as a violinist:

*.. we had a kind of small orchestra under certain conductors. Hungarian, I don't know what nationality. Appelbaum [sic]. He's quite famous himself. And we had some local people.*

So, when exactly was the Syonan Symphony Orchestra founded? Who led the orchestra? And finally, who was Paul Gerentser, the manager of the orchestra?

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## “Rapturous Musical Treat Entrhals Wounded Troops”

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A look at three different sources, the *Syonan Shimbum*, *The Singapore Free Press and Daily News*, and an oral history interview with Victoria Krempl nee Mowe who had performed with the orchestra as a dancer reveals a different picture and hints at other intentions behind the founding of the orchestra.

The life and fate of the Hungarian manager of the orchestra, Paul Gerentser, and his family made the front pages of *The Singapore Free Press and Daily News* on 17 July 1946 when their repatriation was delayed owing to a lack of accommodation on the ship they were to leave on.

While the reasons for Gerentser's repatriation were not made clear in the article and research to date has not revealed any other press reports on this matter, the language of the report and cross references with the abovementioned two sources hint that Gerentser could have been repatriated for reasons of collaboration with Japanese forces during the war.

That the article states the Gerentser were “interned” while awaiting their passage, is already an allusion to the fact that their movement of freedom was restricted. This conjecture of repatriation on grounds of collaboration is corroborated by Victoria Krempl nee Mowe in her oral history interview with the NAS.

Born in 1916 in Sarawak of British descent, Victoria Krempl nee Mowe studied in Singapore and was with the Medical Auxiliary Services as a volunteer when the war broke out. She subsequently joined the group of dancers formed by Mrs Gerentser (as Paul Gerentser's wife was identified as the orchestra's house programmes although pre-war press articles refer to her as Mathilde Gerentser) in order to find employment and security.

Victoria Krempl subsequently married another member of the orchestra, Austrian-born Hungarian musician Francis Steven Krempl—more popularly known as Feri Krempl—who was deputy conductor of the ensemble. After the war, Feri Krempl would remain in Singapore as an influential performer and teacher until his death in 1962. Victoria Krempl worked as a telephone operator and subsequently as a kindergarten teacher until her retirement in the 1980s.

While acknowledging that working with the orchestra offered protection of some sort from the Japanese for its members, Victoria Krempl

nevertheless recalled that “Mr Gerentser was very friendly with the Japanese” and that of “all the Hungarians who were left behind, he was deported back to Hungary when the British came back.”

Victoria Krempl then claimed that Gerentser “... was a sort of collaborator that was how we got so many things through him, because he was very friendly with the Japanese.” Of equal interest is that according to Victoria Krempl, Gerentser “was very anti-British” and he “used to talk to various people anti-British” so that “when the British came back some of the people reported on him and so he was deported, he, his wife and children.”

Even when asked how she felt about the fact that Gerentser had ensured the survival of the orchestra, she replied, with “No, but then he could have been collaborating with them but not talk against the British. He was very anti-British.”

Viewed with this knowledge, the 1946 *The Singapore Free Press*’ account of Gerentser’s wartime musical activities then take on a different light.

It reported that Gerentser was “instrumental in forming and managing” the Syonan Symphony Orchestra and he was also responsible in “no small way for ‘popularising’ Jap and other Oriental songs during the Jap occupation—the Nips, he claimed, would not allow him to organise the otherwise.”

In fact—according to *The Singapore Free Press*—the orchestra began when Gerentser “got together a few musicians soon after the fall of Singapore in 1942, and took on the self-imposed task of entertaining Jap sick and wounded”:

*From then on, he became quite well-known to the Japs, while keen that Gerentser and his band should play to them, gave him little help. It was at the time that the Japs expected Gerentser to run a 20-piece symphony orchestra on five hundred “banana” dollars a month.*

If the above is taken to be true then, the Syonan Symphony Orchestra was initiated not by the Japanese but by Gerentser himself. That he and his family were free to move about during the occupation is understandable: citizens of countries not at war with Japan then were not interned, hence the various observations that the European members of the orchestra were either Hungarian or Czechs who had settled in Singapore pre-World War Two.

Here, a look at the earliest reference to the Syonan Symphony Orchestra from the 10 April 1942 issue of the *Syonan Shimbun* in an article titled “Rapturous Musical Treat Entrals Wounded Troops” is instructive.

On the day before, the orchestra led by Gerentser (whom the reporter referred to as “Gaza”) had performed a three-hour concert to wounded and sick Japanese soldiers squatting under a “threatening sky on a wet quadrangle in the Syonan General Hospital.”

The “skeleton orchestra” comprised three violinists, a cellist, a trumpeter, a bassist, and a pianist, with Gerentser on the drums, while the programme included popular Western classical music and a Japanese work. In addition, more than 10 other pieces were played upon request.

At the conclusion of the concert, the audience “specially enjoyed the Nipponese pieces which were played by request and encored repeatedly” and in one instance “the audience accompanied the orchestra vocally.”

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## “...A magnetic (musical?) personality...”

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So, who was Paul Gerentser? Was he really a collaborator? If the 1946 *The Singapore Free Press* account of the orchestra is accurate, what then motivated Gerentser to take on the “self-imposed task of entertaining Jap sick and wounded” which in turn probably ingratiated him to the Japanese administration? Was it because he used music as an instrument for his and his family’s survival, and that of fellow musicians? Or if indeed he was “anti-British”, did he use music also as a weapon?

In the absence of any account by Gerentser himself to date, we can only reconstruct some facets of his life and the orchestra based on press reports, Paul Abisheganaden’s memoirs and oral history interviews.

The first mention of Gerentser in the press is a 1937 advertisement of him appearing as a singer (although he would later be known as a drummer) with the Reller Hungarian Band at the former Seaview Hotel. The band was founded by Yugoslavian musician Cornell Reller who had arrived in Singapore a year earlier in 1936. Reller’s band grew in popularity within a short period of time because of their Sunday morning broadcasts by the then British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation from the hotel. Reller however died in 1940 and for a year or so after that, nothing significant was heard of Paul Gerentser in the press (although we can find mention of his wife in various variety shows) until the concert on 9 April 1942 for the wounded and sick Japanese soldiers.

In appearance, Gerentser must have been impressive. At the Syonan Symphony Orchestra’s

first performance in 1942, he was described as a “magnetic (musical?) personality, bearing striking resemblance to Paul Whiteman”, while four years later in 1946, *The Singapore Free Press* described him as someone “well-built “and “square shouldered” who spoke with “a strong Continental accent”.

The end of the Japanese Occupation saw the demise of the Syonan Symphony Orchestra which by then had “showed themselves as accomplished in reproducing the staccato of Jap ‘music’ as in the rendering of Schubert classics” and the Gerentser subsequently “busied themselves in a nightclub venture” where Paul Gerentser acted as host of the club—he named it Atomic Club—and his wife danced for the entertainment of Allied officers. This was until their repatriation.

If anything, one can surmise that Paul Gerentser was probably a shrewd entrepreneur and opportunist who knew how to make the best of any circumstances as quickly as possible. He also probably did not have specific loyalty to any one side when it came to matters of war.

When the British fell to the Japanese, he saw the war as an occasion to precipitate his musical career in Singapore through the formation of the Syonan Symphony Orchestra.

If indeed he was “anti-British, the Japanese Occupation then served Gerentser’s purposes. Yet, when the Japanese surrendered to the allied forces, he was just as quick to find a means to ingratiate himself again, this time with the British albeit through a club to entertain the victorious allied forces.

But, given the fact of his repatriation and Victoria Krempf’s observations, perhaps he did have his enemies and perhaps there is some truth to his “anti-British” sentiments and his work with the

Syonan Symphony Orchestra viewed as a form of collaboration.

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“...It will protect me better than a gun or a revolver or anything of that sort...”

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What then of the musicians of the Syonan Symphony Orchestra themselves? What was the legacy of Gerentser?

It would appear that the orchestra did provide some protection for its members during such unpredictable and punishing times.

Perhaps this is best summed up in the words of Gay in his oral history interview when asked if the Japanese had interfered in the work of the orchestra or the lives of its members:

*No, there wasn't at all. As I said already, they all—majority of them rather—felt that if you are a musician somehow or other they had a feeling that you must be a good chap, that you are quite harmless. Anyway, that's how I felt. I felt that as long as I played music, and I could sing a few of their songs, they will not have an ill-feeling towards me or my family. It will protect me better than a gun or a revolver or anything of that sort.*

Perhaps then, even in times of war, regardless of intent, music does have its charms to soothe the savage beast. □

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*To read the full-length essay, please visit Culture Academy's website.*

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### About the Author



Writer, producer and arts manager Phan Ming Yen has helmed a number of leadership posts with arts and cultural organisations in Singapore, including as CEO of non-profit organisation Global Cultural Alliance and is at present COO of The Rice Company Limited. He published his debut collection *That Night By the Beach and Other Stories for a Film Score* in 2012. He is also one of the four writers in the collaborative writing projects, *The Adopted: Stories from Angkor* (2015) and *Lost Bodies: Poems Between Portugal and Home* (2016), while other short stories have appeared in *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*. Phan has also written on the history of music in Singapore in *Cultural Connections*, the journal of the Culture Academy of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and *Singapore Soundscape*. His poetry appeared recently in the online anthology *Atelier of Healing* (<https://www.atelier-of-healing-anthology.com>).



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## Notes:

1. Paul Gerentser's name has been variously spelt with a "z" or "s". This article henceforth would adopt the spelling as "Gerentser" as that was spelling that appeared in the house programme of the Syonan Symphony Orchestra and also the press.