

Musical Practices in Singapore; beginnings

Literature on the music of Singapore may not be voluminous. As musicologist Joseph Peters noted in 1995 when writing the chapter on Singapore for a book about the music of ASEAN countries:

*Very little has been written about the music of Singapore, the reason for which is sometimes hard to explain or understand.*¹ Peters further noted that while many *ethnomusicological treatises on aspects of music in the Southeast Asian region have been churned out, Singapore seems to have been by-passed.* He attributed this to the size of the country: *Perhaps, it was its diminutive stature on the world atlas which caused it to be overlooked.*² Yet, as ethnomusicologist Lee Tong Song would acknowledge five years or so later in his entry in the respected *Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Singapore's *largely Asian population in a post-colonial setting which boasts a mixture of cultural attributes*³ has resulted in a diversity of musical cultures.

It is indeed a diversity that in fact has posed challenges for those writing about the music of Singapore. Given this very diversity, questions arise: Where and how does one begin to chronicle the music of Singapore? Whose and which type or genre or tradition of music does one begin with?

Perhaps lyricist, writer and advocate of Malay music, Yusnor Ef had hinted at such issues when in his article *Perkembangan Muzik Melayu Singapura 50-an hingga 90-an* (Development of Malay Music of Singapore from 50s until 90s) he began with the simple question: "Muzik, apa itu muzik?" (Music, what is this that is called music?)⁴ In seeing the necessity to define "what is music" within so specific a scope of exploration, perhaps Yusnor acknowledged that even within a particular communal or cultural group, the notion of what exactly *is* music may not be universally accepted. What are the ramifications of a writer faced with articulating the diverse practices of culture *within* and *among* communal groups of Singapore?

Existing Narratives

There has been a tendency, maybe temptation, to begin with and to focus on the influence of the musical traditions from the West and their legacy in an attempt to provide a broad overview of music of Singapore. Alex Abisheganaden's attempt called *The Music Score: 82 Years in Tune* was written for *The Straits Times* in celebration of the country's 17th National Day celebrations in 1982.⁵ Regarded by many as the "Father of Guitar" in Singapore for his advocacy of the instrument for more than 30 years and one of the leading figures in music education in Singapore, Abisheganaden's article was an ambitious one for a newspaper article. His work traced 82 years of music history, starting from

1900. What was interesting in Abisheganaden's article however is an emphasis on Western music; or rather how the **music scene** of Singapore and **western music** becomes synonymous in the discourse.

This sudden shift takes place as if when talking about the “music scene” in Singapore, “music” could not have been anything else except “western music”: *While we reflect on all aspects of life and take pride in our achievement in the arts, let us trace our beginnings and follow the development of our music scene over the years. In doing so, we will appreciate better the efforts of leading musicians, the role of government, the contribution of private music societies and schools and the effect of music through the mass media. We can chart the development of western music in four periods ...*⁶

In Abisheganaden's article, the various types of music understood as being "Western" are:

- Music that were performed in the churches by the British community
- Music that were performed in hotels by European musicians. This was also called ‘light’ music
- Pop music which was Hawaiian music in the 1930s as well as songs which were from the early period of Hollywood musicals
- Classical music performed by serious musicians and students in amateur string/wind ensembles. Such ensembles could also include amateur orchestras such as the CKT Orchestra, Singapore Philharmonic Orchestra, Singapore Youth Orchestra
- Music performed by professional ensembles such as the Singapore Symphony Orchestra
- Music drama which included works by Gilbert and Sullivan and Broadway shows⁷

This replacement of the more comprehensive and broader “music” by the more specific “Western music” is all the more significant especially when the article appeared on National Day issue of the mainly English daily. It is a substitution that cannot be taken lightly especially when the article served a double function as a historical piece and as a tribute to the efforts of the present and a past generation. As if to reinforce the point, the article begins with descriptions of performances of Western music:

*In early Singapore, western music was performed in the churches by the British community and in the hotels by European musicians contracted from abroad.*⁸

Twenty years later, little has changed. In 2002, in composer Bernard Tan's essay *Sounding Board: Music and Cultural Heritage* written for the National Arts

Council's publication *Narratives*, it is the introduction of Western music that heralds the beginning of music being integral to life in Singapore society:

*Music has been an integral part of life in Singapore since its founding by Sir Stamford Raffles, when Western music entered the island to join the indigenous Malay musical traditions of the region. The arrival of Chinese and Indian immigrants added their musical cultures to an already rich multi-cultural mix, which included the surviving traditions of the Portuguese from an earlier colonial occupation.*⁹

In Joseph Peter's contribution to the *Musics of Asean* seven years earlier in 1995, the music of Singapore is broadly divided into two categories: "Traditional Music in Singapore" which comprises Malay, Chinese and Indian music and "Western based musical composition" which comprises mainly compositions by Singapore composers. In his conclusion, there is no doubting the significance Peters places on the influence of Western musical traditions:

*There is an energetic purposefulness in Western-based musical composition in Singapore, despite the lack of long tradition and the infrastructure of academia.*¹⁰

Even in the face of the varied musical cultures of Singapore that arises from the various communities of the country, for Peters, Western music provides the foundation for Singapore composers to begin their work:

*The Singapore composer relies heavily on the language of Western music. He sees this as the foundation upon which he could be innovative even to the point of incorporating elements from other musics in relation to the multiracial cultures of Singapore.*¹¹

Writing four years after Peters in 1999, Joseph Pereira in *Legends of the Golden Venus: Bands that rocked Singapore from the '60s to the '90s* acknowledges the influence of the West in Singapore pop music, as he states in the first paragraph of the Introduction:

*Not surprisingly, when you look for the origins of Singaporean pop, rock 'n' roll, blues, and R & B music, the road leads back to Britain.*¹²

The legacy and influence of the West is one that is hard to deny; made all the more evident with the formation of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO), a Western classical music ensemble as the first professional performing arts group in Singapore. In his essay *Sounding Board: Music and Cultural Heritage*, Bernard Tan regarded the year of the founding of the SSO, 1979, as a "watershed year in Singapore's musical development".¹³ Moreover, the two of the first recipients of the Cultural Medallion, Singapore's highest arts award, were men who were, and still are, involved in the practice of Western music: Choo Hoey, the first music director (and subsequently conductor emeritus) of

the SSO and David Lim Kim San, one of the founders of the Singapore Youth Choir.

Even architecturally, the landscape of the performing arts in Singapore is one that is shaped by the influence of the West. The nation's first purpose built concert hall, that of the Concert Hall of the nation's main performing arts centre, Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay which opened in 2002, is one which was built upon the construction principles of the best of 19th century and 20th century concert halls in the West. For the acoustician Artec Consultants, the Concert Hall was built primarily as a space for a Western symphony orchestra.

When asked in an interview if Artec considered the specific cultural situation and needs of the community where a hall is built, Russell Johnson, who had also designed the Morton H Meyerson Symphony Centre in Dallas and the Kimmel Centre, home of the Philadelphia Orchestra, said:

*When one of the goals is to provide a place for symphony orchestras to make music, to build one of the four or six best concert halls in the world, there are basic requirements which must be fulfilled. Good acoustics for Western music are good acoustics for other genres.*¹⁴

In fact, even within the music of other communal groups, the influence of the West cannot be denied. Here, Yusnor Ef notes the influence of the Beatles and Rolling Stone on the Malay music scene in the 1960s:

*Diawal tahun 60-an muncul pula suatu tren baru dalam dunia muzik Melayu moden. Pengaruh Beattles [sic] dan Rolling Stone [sic] telah mula dirasakan ramai penyanyi dan pencipta lagu serta penulis lirik yang dapat tempat di hati peminat-peminat lagu-lagu Melayu moden ...*¹⁵

(In the early 1960s, there emerged a new trend in the world of modern Malay music. The influence of the Beatles and Rolling Stones were beginning to be felt by many singers and composers as well as lyricists who had fans of modern Malay songs ...)

Among a portion of the Mandarin-conversant community, as will be shown later in this book, the music of American folk singers such as Bob Dylan and Peter, Paul and Mary exerted an influence on the Xinyao movement. In the face of the overwhelming presence of the West, ethnomusicologist Lee Tong Soon in his entry on Singapore for the highly regarded New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians provides a different approach. Here, Lee begins with an important assumption, that of Singapore being a multi-cultural society:

*With a largely Asian population in a post-colonial setting, Singapore boasts a mixture of cultural attributes, reflected in its diverse musical culture.*¹⁶

Eschewing a chronological account and avoiding discussion of "traditional" versus "contemporary", Lee, views music in categories that are at once communal, cultural and genre-specific:

- Music of the three major ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay, India)
- Euro- American classical music
- Popular Music in Mandarin and English
- Musicals by Singaporean composers that arose in the late 1980s
- Locally composed, produced and performed rock music in the 1990s

In Lee's entry, "European art music" receives the least space and he concludes with Singapore as a nation that since its independence has been "negotiating its musical identity."¹⁷

Music: A Working Definition

Given the various narratives mentioned above, the challenge that faces any attempt to understand and present a history or overview of the music of Singapore would be quite simply: How does one want to begin? Would it be chronological or communal? Or is there another way to begin, hence a return to the question that Yusnor Ef asked in his own chronicle of the development of Malay music: What is Music?

The view of music in our book is based on that of music educator David Elliott who sees music as...*at root...a human activity...something that people do.....a diverse human practice.*¹⁸ Elliott essentially sees music as a four dimensional concept that is comprises: an activity, a "doer" of the activity, an outcome of the activity or that there is something done and the complete context within which the activity (and the doers) is performed.¹⁹

Conceived in this way, the notion of "music" goes beyond just being a work that is performed or what emerges out of a musical performance. In this concept, the "doer" or the music maker, makes musical works to be listened to for the intricacy of intramusical design, musical expressions of emotion, musical representation of people, places and things and expression of various kinds of belief, whether personal or political. As such, no matter how individual or non-utilitarian, *all works of music incorporate social and practical realities.* Here, music is a human practice that is a formed of activities, *which exhibit a range of internal goods and standards of excellence, which are recognisable by those participating in the practices.* It would also see musical works as being *inherently communal constructions—expressive of the social and cultural practices through which composers compose at different times and places.*²⁰

Elliott, however, is not alone in holding such a view. Ethnomusicologist John Blacking has admitted to a deliberate use of inverted commas with the term “music”:

*Although every known human society has what trained musicologists might recognise as music, there are some that have no word for music or whose concept of music has a significance quite different from that generally associated with the word music...“Music” is both the observable product of human intentional action and a basic human mode of thought by which any human action may be constituted. The most characteristic and effective embodiment of this mode of thought is what we would call music.*²¹

Blacking reasoned that if music was understood from such a perspective, *we ought to be able to learn something about the structure of human interaction...by way of the structures involved in music, and so learn more about the inner nature of man’s mind....observation of musical structures may reveal some of the structural principles on which human life is based.*²²

Here, an instance of this can be found through the work of Anthony Seeger who worked amongst the Suya of the Upper Xingu in Brazil who called his study **musical anthropology**, which counters renowned ethnomusicologist Alan Merriam’s seminal description of ethnomusicology as *a study of music in culture*. For Seeger, music is not just a thing which happens *in society* but a society might be conceived as something which happens *in music*. Here, Seeger has argued that it was through *music and dance performance that fundamental aspects of Suya social organisation...are recognised*. For Seeger, *Suya society as a totality might be understood in terms of their music...Suya society was an orchestra, its village was a concert hall and its year a song.*²³

Developing and expanding an argument along similar lines as articulated by Seeger, ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes further reinforces the place of music as not only an activity within society but one which actually constructs societies:

*Music does not reflect...music is not simply a marker in a prestructured social space but the means by which this space can be transformed. Music is socially meaningful not entirely but largely because it provides means by which people recognise identities and places, and the boundaries which separate them.*²⁴

If music is, *at root level, a human activity,*²⁵ context dependent and practice-specific, then a consideration of musical practice is dependent on situating either observable processes or products of such human behaviour. As Elliott suggests: *Each musical practice produces music in the sense of specific kinds of musical works-identified as the outcomes of particular musical practices because they demonstrate the shared principles and standards of the*

*practitioners who make them.*²⁶

Our study of musical practices in Singapore is reliant on an interpretation of musical practices as *human generated* practices; practices to be understood in relation to meanings and values evidenced in actual music making and music listening in situated contexts:

*The noun **praxis** derives from the verb **prasso**, meaning (among other things) 'to do' or 'to act purposefully'. But when we use the term **prasso** intransitively its meaning shifts from action alone to the idea of action in a situation. As Aristotle used the word in his *Poetics*, **praxis** connotes action that is embedded in, responsive to, and reflective of a specific context of effort.....the term *praxial* emphasises that music ought to be understood in relation to the meanings and values evidenced in actual music making and music listening in specific cultural contexts.*²⁷

Here, a parallel can be found in Ruth Finnegan's study²⁸ of music-making in Milton Keynes, England, who produced a series of searching questions equally relevant to a discussion of musical practices in Singapore: What do they consist of? How is it sustained and by whom? Are the kind of events mentioned earlier one-off affairs or are there consistent patterns or a predictable structure into which they fall? Are they still robust or now fading away? Who are these local musicians – marginal minority or a substantial body? Who are their patrons today? What is the significance of local music-making for the ways people manage and make sense of modern urban life, or our experience as active and creative human beings? We could extend these questions to include: How can we consider such public events a feature of life in Singapore, mainstream or marginal? What relevance do they hold for the individuals who participate in these events? Do they make a contribution to society? How?

Aims and strategies

Given the context and justification, this work aims to achieve the following:

- Identify musical practices that have existed in Singapore since 1819;
- Functions of these practices;
- How and why did they emerged; and
- How they changed over time

Three possible strategies lay in front of us for such a study:

One such way was to pursue musical practices in the various communities of Singapore: primarily Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian. However, as our study will show, members from the various ethnic communities participated in musical practices considered the purview of a single or particular community. Wells and Lee note that in some cases, in certain musical practices, members of some communities *were highly overrepresented*,²⁹ in contradistinction to a

demographic majority where one community is bound to dominate by sheer numbers. Moreover, a communal approach to the study of a musical practice may engender a view that the right to teach or engage in musical practice of a specific community is the sole purview of those within that community; that it is highly unlikely for someone else to understand a musical practice outside of their culture. This is a view that is redolent of arrogance and ignorance of intelligent and perceptive musicians who are highly motivated in their gravitation to musical practices outside of their cultural affiliation. In our experience and explorations, music-making has been able to transcend ethnic and religious boundaries. As our study hopes to do justice to this transcendent quality of music-making with an approach to understanding musical activity that transcends the communal lines, this strategy was eschewed.

A second approach, a chronological one, also presented difficulties. The main reason for this is that one immediate consequence of a chronological approach is in a possibly teleological account that sees musical activities in terms of growth, development and or decline. Additionally, a chronological approach considers less a vertical configuration of apprehending a musical practice in favour of a more a linear time-based approach that can prove contentious. For instance, if one were to chronicle a history of a particular musical practice through public performances, issues arise. Public appearances are not only sites of individual hearing/s but also expressions, whether they involve individuals who act as individuals or individuals who represent a community. Here one is reminded of the Foucauldian “event” which involves the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it...the entry of a masked other. The “event” in public therefore suggests a deeper level of this collective action, namely ways in which it may have been documented, initiated, nurtured and supported. Beginnings in a public sphere usually conceal genealogies in the domestic or private sphere. Moreover, other questions arise; namely the supporters of such endeavours, and in what ways. Throughout the research for this study, in the absence of written documentation, oral interviews - while unable to fully determine this genealogy - for now has sufficed to draw sufficient attention to the phenomenon of the musical practice, its continuity and the interviewees understanding of an origin from his/her perspective. Such perspectives allow for a vertical configuration which enable chronological perspectives to act as one of the many dimensions of a musical practice.

The third approach was to study the practice of music based on the categories proposed by ethnomusicologist Alan Merriam who proposed ten functions ascribed to those who use Music:³⁰

- Emotional expression

Considerable evidence has indicated that music functions widely and on a number of levels as a means of emotional expression, providing a vehicle for the expression of ideas and emotions not revealed in ordinary discourse.

- Aesthetic enjoyment

Here, Merriam concedes that the study of music concerns the concepts of aesthetics and the interrelationship of the arts although it must be borne in mind that the definition of aesthetic and that it is also a culture bound concept.

- Entertainment

A distinction has to be drawn between pure entertainment—which Merriam suggests is a particular feature of music in Western society—and entertainment combined with other functions, the latter, of which is more a prevalent feature of societies that privilege orality more than literacy.

- Communication

Of all the things that music might be, Merriam is convinced that music is *not a universal language* but rather shaped in terms of the culture it is a part.

- Symbolic representation

Music functions in all societies as a symbolic representation of other things, ideas and behaviours.

- Physical response

Here Merriam suggests that music eliciting physical response is clearly counted upon in its use in human society, though the responses may be shaped by cultural conventions; whether they may elicit, excite or channel crowd behaviour through dance, trance, rituals, cohesion, to name a few.

- Enforcing conformity to social norms

This refers to the use of songs at initiation ceremonies, songs of protest, and other songs that call attention to social propriety and impropriety within a community.

- Validation of social institutions and religious rituals

Here music becomes a means via recitation of legend and myth in song, through which religious systems are validated and percepts expressed.

- Contribution to the continuity and stability of culture

If music allows emotional expression, gives aesthetic pleasure, entertains, communicates, elicits physical response, enforces conformity to social norms and validates social institutions and religious rituals, then, as Merriam points out, contributes to the continuity and stability of culture.

- Contribution to the integration of society

Merriam suggests that in providing a solidarity point around which members of society congregate, music functions to integrate society. Music then provides a rallying point around which members of a society or community gather to engage in activities that require the cooperation and coordination of the group. Not all music is this performed but every society has occasions signaled by music which draws its members together and reminds them of their unity.

Merriam's neutral approach to the way in which music functions are indeed tantalizing prospect where the functions draw the musical practices. However, there are fundamental problems in addressing such a configuration. First, we are likely to find overlap; more than one community may be found to use music to function in a specific context—for instance, the use of music in contexts of ritual or worship. Second, it is not clear that we can assume music functioned for a particular community in the same site-specific way when re-situated among heterogeneous communities in Singapore.

When Dr. Eugene Dairianathan was invited to make a presentation of Musics of Singapore at a Music and Sociology Conference in Gothenburg in 2002, it was premised on a view, "*there are four different races and therefore...four different musics*". In fact, an important corollary of this research project is the emergence of lesser-known practices. If anything, this research has revealed that musical practices in Singapore do not fall neatly into the four above-mentioned groupings. Describing practices as ethnic-based activity draws in more than those who were said to be most naturally affiliated to it via ethnicity. Secondly it also borders on privileging discourses in music. Nowhere is the difference between cultural practice of the displaced home and re-placed home more pronounced when re-presentations become the purview of national discourse. Gayatri Spivak expresses her concerns in the following way:

*Certain practices of...arts in the broadest sense are said to inhabit the private sector. But institutions of...art, as well as the criticism of art, belong to the public.*³¹

When applied to a Singaporean context of ethnic-based studies, the potential problem of highlighting certain practices more than others is tantamount to privileging one practice over another or highlighting the practices in such a way as to suggest that an entire community subscribes to this one practice. This is further exacerbated when the representation is taken up at institutional and even public levels of discourse. For instance mention of Indian music in Singapore may create an impression that there is one type of music that all Indians subscribe to – out of a diversity of musical practices, classical, folk and popular culture, of an equal diversity of Indian ethno-linguistic groups in Singapore. That also makes an assumption that all Indians will not have participated in musical practices of the culturally diverse communities living in Singapore.

Our explorations indicate musical practices here have, by and large, been able to transcend these boundaries. Our attempt therefore, is to see how best we can reflect this fluidity of communities, *in* and *among* communities. As such we intend to present our study of the various musical practices in Singapore as musical practices, bearing in mind though, Merriam's ten functions as significant points of homage and departure.

Methodology

That which we propose to do then in this study is to identify musical practices as the phenomenon in which they appear as, across communal lines and genres. Here, music appeared in the following:

- As a passing reference to other issues, like crime or legal action or even controversy surrounding issues involving thing musical
- In publications where for instance music fell under entertainment or leisure or even sports sections.
- A significant place in the newspapers if the musical event, personality merited the significant space like the front section usually reserved for more important events. Such events could be local or performed locally. More often, such events/personalities were from overseas and the newspapers acted as a publicity machine.
- As a way of establishing hegemonic discourse (as in the case of western art music).
- As a silent or silenced component of events in writing. This comes about when practice is not documented or recorded because practitioners are only too well aware of their audience reception and practitioners feel

there is little to gain about an evanescent practice such as theirs. Hence, music appears to be alive in oral accounts far more than documentary evidence.

Our study has taken on board these concerns and attempted procuring materials from two directions:

- Data collation and information on activities involving music in newspaper collections. Besides the English medium, every attempt has been made to checking resources in Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, where possible. For the most part of our research, the English language newspapers and documents in English have acted as our primary source of information. Further and future research will invite more thorough documentation and translation from sources in Jawi, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and the possibility of other languages, based on the strength of documentation in local settings. The collected data helped to form the basis for a comprehensive yet concise account of the various music-making activities in Singapore through written discourse, which includes newspaper reports, programme leaflets, reminiscences, musical scores if made available to name a few, including the Oral History Archives. If a practice has musical scores and such data, that can be used profitably. Any documentation surviving as recordings serves as archival material for further research.
- Oral interviews conducted with practitioners who contributed by leading, facilitating, creating or participating in music-making activities in the various communities. The transcripts of the interviews are given back to the interviewees for their agreement to publish quotations which may be extrapolated from their interviews. It is also hoped that other forms of evidence may be obtained such as poster information, photographs, CD resources, cassette resources, video-taped performances and any other useful sources.

Our research findings have led to the view that a more in-depth search is required; we recommend further and future research work is pursued along these lines. The same too applies to research which requires researching archival material overseas. Given the relative scarcity of documentation and discourse in some of the practices, we have relied on both written documentation and oral interviews to yield information which contributes to an emerging profile of the practice in spite of gaps between one fact and another, one event and another, the space of the known and the silent, ways of knowing such a practice, and value and belief systems not easily amenable or accessible to an outsider. With respect to oral interviews, enquiries were made through

contacts and their networks. Interviewees were selected out of names suggested in our field research as well-known practitioners in the scene. Interviewees were informed of the nature of the search and were asked for any form of documentation or photographs or recorded material that may have proven useful in corroborating claims and account. As there were those who obliged, there were those who declined.

In the course of our research, we have also noted that some practices have been better documented than others. Hence the content of each practice differs in length and approach from another practice. For convenience, we have decided to list these musical practices alphabetically, as the practice is commonly known in the English language.

Finally, this work aims to provide another way of looking at music in Singapore and as such, aims less to be in-depth in all the practices than to open up areas of new research and different ways of understanding music in Singapore. In laying out these practices side by side and not one favouring the other and not within communal lines, what has emerged is the possibility of a way of understanding the music of Singapore that transcends communal and cultural lines.

In doing so, and because society can be conceived as something that happens in music, perhaps such a view of music of Singapore reveals perhaps the possibility of the emergent of a society that transcends the very same communal and cultural boundaries.

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