

Choo Hoey: “Maestro among the cognoscenti”

By Jaime Koh, written on 17 February 2014

Choo Hoey was the resident conductor and music director of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) for 17 years from 1978 to 1996. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Choo had a successful conducting career in Europe. He returned to Singapore in the late 1970s to help set up and lead the SSO. He remains conductor emeritus at SSO and still performs in Singapore, Europe and China.

Choo Hoey was born on 20 October 1934 in Palembang, Sumatra, Indonesia to teachers Choo Seng and Wang Siu Ying.¹ He was the younger of two children.² As a young child Choo started learning the violin from his father, who taught Choo from a “Teach Yourself Violin” manual.³ Though neither Choo nor his father had formal music education, Choo was surrounded by Western classical music. His father had a large collection of classical music recordings and would play various violin works by Menuhin, Heifetz and the like for his son.⁴

In 1947, as racial tensions in Indonesia’s fight for independence from the Dutch mounted, Choo was sent to Singapore for safety.^{5 6 7} In Singapore, Choo attended the Chinese High School⁸ and started his first formal violin lessons under renowned violinist Goh Soon Tioe.^{9 10}

From violinist to conductor

After completing his academic studies in 1951, Choo decided to pursue his music education in London’s Royal Academy of Music where he studied the violin, horn, composition and conducting.¹¹ Following his graduation from the Royal Academy of Music in 1955, he went to Brussels where he continued violin studies under Andre Gertler at the Royale Conservatoire de Musique.^{12 13}

Although Choo was studying the violin, he had really set his sights on conducting. “My intention was always to pursue conducting,” he said in an interview. “I was fascinated by a group of people making so many beautiful sounds, all the sounds merging together and making a very beautiful, complete universe.”¹⁴ Choo said of the first time he attended a full symphony orchestra performance during his time in London: “I thought it was amazing how one man was able to wield so many different elements into one entity.”¹⁵

¹ Nanda, A. (2014, January 18). Building a beautiful SSO. *The Straits Times*.

² Chia, A. (2009, February 16). Choo Hoey takes on SCO. *The Straits Times*.

³ Chia, A. (2009, February 16). Choo Hoey takes on SCO. *The Straits Times*.

⁴ Chia, A. (2009, February 16). Choo Hoey takes on SCO. *The Straits Times*.

⁵ Values imparted helped shape my life: Choo. (1978, December 13). *The Straits Times*.

⁶ Sanuja, B. (1993, March 21). Father knew best. *Straits Times*.

⁷ Ho Soon Guang (ed). *Internationally renowned conductor Choo Hoey*. Singapore: Hwa Chong Old Boys’ Association, 1978, p. 88

⁸ Values imparted helped shape my life: Choo. (1978, December 13). *The Straits Times*.

⁹ Nanda, A. (2014, January 18). Building a beautiful SSO. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁰ Choo Hoey to conduct operas in Greece. (1972, December 25). *The Straits Times*.

¹¹ Nanda, A. (2014, January 18). Building a beautiful SSO. *The Straits Times*.

¹² Nanda, A. (2014, January 18). Building a beautiful SSO. *The Straits Times*.

¹³ Choo Hoey, 'maestro among the cognoscenti'. (1989, August 30). *The Straits Times*.

¹⁴ Nanda, A. (2014, January 18). Building a beautiful SSO. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁵ Sanuja, B. (1993, March 21). Father knew best. *The Straits Times*.

At the Royal Academy of Music, Choo's talent for conducting was already apparent. He graduated with two awards for conducting: the Manns Memorial Prize and the Ernest Read Prize.¹⁶

Determined to pursue conducting as a career, Choo was said to have hounded impresarios for opportunities. Finally, Choo was given a chance to conduct a chamber ensemble. In the audience was Marcel Couvelier, director of the Brussels Philharmonic Society, whom Choo had invited. Impressed by his performance, Couvelier invited Choo to fill in for Spanish conductor Ataulfo Argenta who had passed away days before a concert with the Belgian National Orchestra.¹⁷

Conducting the Belgian National Orchestra in 1958, at the age of 24, was a milestone in Choo's professional career. The experience launched his career in Europe, where Choo would perform as guest conductor for many orchestras including the London Philharmonic Orchestra and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.¹⁸

Choo's conducting stints also led him to his life partner. Choo was conducting the Athens State Orchestra in 1968 when he met Greek archaeologist Alexandra Avleropoulou. "I was swept off my feet by his conductorship of the Athens State Orchestra", said Avleropoulou.¹⁹

The couple married in 1969 and Choo moved to Athens which he made his base.²⁰ Subsequently, Choo was invited to conduct several orchestras in Greece, including the Athens State Orchestra, the National State Opera Orchestra and the Hellenic Radio and Television Symphony Orchestra.²¹

Coming back to Singapore

In 1973, then deputy prime minister of Singapore, Dr Goh Keng Swee remarked that Singapore should have its own professional orchestra. Choo was the first choice as conductor of that orchestra.²²

At that time, Choo was living in Greece with his family and had a successful career in Europe. It was not an easy decision for him to return to Singapore. "To come back was a great challenge. Singapore had nothing at that time," said Choo. "There was no music school, where do you get music talent to form an orchestra? Unlike London, where I can call Guildhall, here I have to scout and audition for members."²³ Nevertheless, Choo returned to Singapore in 1978 to take up the positions of resident conductor and artistic director of the newly formed Singapore Symphony Orchestra.²⁴

The SSO's inaugural performance was held at the Singapore Conference Hall in January 1979. With 41 musicians, the programme included Schubert's *Unfinished*

¹⁶ Choo Hoey, 'maestro among the cognoscenti'. (1989, August 30). *The Straits Times*.

¹⁷ Nanda, A. (2014, January 18). Building a beautiful SSO. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁸ Ling, P. W. (1978, December 19). How Alexandra was swept into marriage. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁹ Ling, P. W. (1978, December 19). How Alexandra was swept into marriage. *The Straits Times*.

²⁰ Ling, P. W. (1978, December 19). How Alexandra was swept into marriage. *The Straits Times*.

²¹ Choo Hoey, 'maestro among the cognoscenti'. (1989, August 30). *The Straits Times*.

²² Dawson, T. (1996, July 26). Choo Hoey – did he jump – or was he pushed? *The Straits Times*.

²³ Nanda, A. (2014, January 18). Building a beautiful SSO. *The Straits Times*.

²⁴ Ling, P. W. (1978, December 19). How Alexandra was swept into marriage. *The Straits Times*.

Symphony and American composer Charles Ives' *The Unanswered Question*. On the programme for the night, Choo said: "Because I really had a lot of unanswered questions...Really a very suggestive programme because I was also very unsure."²⁵

A man of controversy

Choo has been described by various music critics as being uncommonly capable, artistically and technically outstanding, intense, highly gifted, stimulating, meticulous and of having contagious vitality.²⁶ But Choo's tenure at the SSO was not without controversy. There have been criticisms over his choice of music, his hiring of musicians and his almost-absolute control over the orchestra.^{27 28 29 30}

One major criticism levelled at Choo was his preference for foreign musicians over local ones. Of the original SSO team, only a handful was Singaporeans.³¹ Musicians reported of tensions between themselves and Choo, who was too intent on the scores to be performed rather than constructing a working relationship with the musicians. Critics have similarly noted Choo's over-focus on the scores rather than bringing the orchestra together as a coherent whole.³²

But Choo was also credited for expanding the orchestra's repertoire. As Choo was said to have a "horror of mechanical repetition",³³ he was always exploring new repertoires, often going for the most interesting and unusual works on the list.³⁴ During Choo's 17-year stint as conductor and music director, the SSO performed more than 730 compositions.³⁵

For Choo, listening to a wide repertoire is important for one's music education. In one of his earlier interviews in the 1980s, he said: "I recall in my student days that if an orchestra did not do Beethoven, Mozart or Tchaikovsky, no one would go. In Singapore, we are encouraging Singaporeans to be more open-minded and to open their ears and listen to as many different schools and fashions in music."³⁶

In 1980, Choo was awarded the inaugural Cultural Medallion.³⁷ Though at that time the SSO was still in its infancy, Choo had already set great sights for the orchestra, including the training and recruitment of local musicians.^{38 39}

Still, Choo has his supporters. Said Lynette Seah, SSO violinist, "His biggest strength is that he works very, very hard. He feels passionately for music and I have total

²⁵ Nanda, A. (2014, January 18). Building a beautiful SSO. *The Straits Times*.

²⁶ Ho Soon Guang (ed). *Internationally renowned conductor Choo Hoey*. Singapore: Hwa Chong Old Boys' Association, 1978, pp. 57-63.

²⁷ Growing pains of a young orchestra (1979, November 28). *The Straits Times*.

²⁸ Dawson, T. (1996, July 26). Choo Hoey – did he jump – or was he pushed? *The Straits Times*.

²⁹ Phan, M. Y. (1996, February 8). Choo Hoey can leave with head held high. *The Straits Times*.

³⁰ Chord and discord. (1981, July 25). *The Straits Times*.

³¹ Chew, D. (2006, April 26). Orchestral manoeuvres in the dark. *TODAY*.

³² Chord and discord. (1981, July 25). *The Straits Times*.

³³ Dawson, T. (1996, July 26). Choo Hoey – did he jump – or was he pushed? *The Straits Times*.

³⁴ Dawson, T. (1996, July 26). Choo Hoey – did he jump – or was he pushed? *The Straits Times*.

³⁵ Dawson, T. (1996, July 26). Choo Hoey – did he jump – or was he pushed? *The Straits Times*.

³⁶ Mr Maestro. (1984, January 8). *Singapore Monitor*.

³⁷ Six who are tops in their fields win first cultural awards. (1980, March 4). *The Straits Times*.

³⁸ Chord and discord. (1981, July 25). *The Straits Times*.

³⁹ Second year will be much better. (1980, January 20). *The Straits Times*.

respect for that.”⁴⁰

Stepping down from SSO

In 1996, Choo, then 62 years old, stepped down as the music director of SSO.⁴¹ He was made conductor emeritus and continues to guest conduct the SSO on occasions. Now he spends most of his time in Greece and London, but still guest conducts in Europe and China.⁴²

Quote

“When I conduct, each piece, literally speaking, contains the essence of a composer's thought. Each piece is the search for the truth. I find that very exciting.”⁴³

Awards

- 1980 Cultural Medallion winner
- 1982 Public Service Star
- 1989 Honorary doctorate awarded by the National University of Singapore⁴⁴
- 1997 Chevalier des Arts et Lettres, France
- 2000 Life Time Achievement Award, Compass

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⁴⁰ Phan, M. Y. (1996, February 8). Choo Hoey can leave with head held high. *Straits Times*.

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