

Singapore National Youth Orchestra: cultivating young talents

Written by Jaime Koh, 28 February 2014

The Singapore National Youth Orchestra (SNYO) comprises of young musicians from various educational institutions in Singapore. Funded and managed by the Ministry of Education, the SNYO is a major co-curricular activity for the schools. The SNYO performs regularly at the annual Singapore Youth Festival events, and has competed and performed overseas.

The Singapore National Youth Orchestra (SNYO) consists of young musicians from various schools across Singapore, from primary to tertiary levels. The orchestra is managed by the Ministry of Education and aims to provide its student members with “an exemplary orchestral experience and the highest quality professional music education and training”.¹ It is not associated with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) although it has been often been mistaken as its youth wing or as a combined school band.² Although the SNYO as it is known, only came into being in 2001, it has a long history stretching back to the early 20th century.

Origins

The SNYO can trace its origins to the Children’s Orchestra started by E. A. Brown in 1933. Brown, a choirmaster at St Andrew’s Cathedral, organised an orchestra comprising children aged between 11 and 16 years old, with most of them playing the violin.³ By 1938, the Children’s Orchestra had been reorganised into the Singapore Young People’s Orchestra, still under the conductorship of Brown.^{4 5} The orchestra gave regular concerts at the Victoria Memorial Hall, known as Children’s Concerts, which were a feature of the local entertainment scene until the outbreak of Second World War.⁶

The orchestra was resuscitated after the war and renamed Singapore’s Junior Symphony Orchestra (SJSO) in 1948.^{7 8} The SJSO was conducted by Glan Williams, a Welshman who was appointed Master of Music in the Department of Education.⁹ In the 1950s, the orchestra – which came under the aegis of the Department of Education, was conducted by Paul Abisheganaden, and in the 1960s, Benjamin

¹ Ministry of Education. Background information on the SYF. Retrieved from <http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/files/2012/07/syf-2012-snyo-annex-b.pdf>

² Playing for a new image. (1983, March 18). *The Straits Times*.

³ Musical children (1934, November 16), *The Straits Times*.

⁴ Abisheganaden, P. (2005). Notes across the years: Anecdotes from a musical life. Singapore: Unipress, p. 25.

⁵ Singapore Young People’s Orchestra. (1938, October 15). *The Singapore Free Press*.

⁶ Abisheganaden, P. (2005). Notes across the years: Anecdotes from a musical life. Singapore: Unipress, p. 136.

⁷ Abisheganaden, P. (2005). Notes across the years: Anecdotes from a musical life. Singapore: Unipress, p. 26.

⁸ Child musicians to give recitals. (1948, June 12). *The Straits Times*.

⁹ Abisheganaden, P. (2005). Notes across the years: Anecdotes from a musical life. Singapore: Unipress, p. 23.

Khoo.^{10 11}

Management and organisation in the early years

In the 1970s, the orchestra was reorganised as the Singapore Youth Orchestra (SYO) and was managed by the Young Musicians' Society.¹² This society was established by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 1968 to coordinate and direct the ministry's Music Education Programme.¹³

One of the SYO's major milestones was a 1971 trip to Lausanne, Switzerland to participate in the International Festival of Youth Orchestras.¹⁴ Then, the orchestra was conducted by well-known violinist and music teacher Goh Soon Tioe.¹⁵ At the time, most of the SYO members were also young musicians belonging to the Goh Soon Tioe String Orchestra.¹⁶

Then, the SYO was plagued with various problems including lack of funds for instruments, lack of rehearsal venues and trained wind players. Membership also began to dwindle.¹⁷ After Goh stepped down as conductor in 1975 due to poor health, the SYO disbanded.^{18 19}

In 1977, the SYO was regrouped as part of the University of Singapore's Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Paul Abisheganaden.²⁰ When the Singapore Symphony Orchestra was formed in 1978 as Singapore's first professional orchestra, the SYO became a feeder for the SSO, with many SYO members carrying on to play in the SSO or receiving SSO scholarships to further their musical education.²¹

Becoming a national youth orchestra

Just over two years after it was regrouped under the University of Singapore, the SYO experienced another change of management. In 1980, the Ministry of Education took

¹⁰ Nanda, A. (2011, September 2). Death of a maestro. *The Straits Times*.

¹¹ Goh, V. (1992). *Goh Soon Tioe: One great symphony*. Singapore: Landmark Books, p. 106.

¹² Playing for a new image. (1983, March 18). *The Straits Times*.

¹³ Tan, S. L. (1979, August 21). Society that gave fillip to music and dance. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁴ Chan, T. L. (1985, February 6). A busy year for SYO. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁵ Goh, V. (1992). *Goh Soon Tioe: One great symphony*. Singapore: Landmark Books, pp. 105-107.

¹⁶ Goh, V. (1992). *Goh Soon Tioe: One great symphony*. Singapore: Landmark Books, p. 107.

¹⁷ Goh, V. (1992). *Goh Soon Tioe: One great symphony*. Singapore: Landmark Books, p. 111.

¹⁸ Sung, B. (1979, June 2). University's new orchestra looking for proper home. *The Straits Times*.

¹⁹ Sung, B. (1979, June 2). University's new orchestra looking for proper home. *The Straits Times*.

²⁰ Sung, B. (1979, June 2). University's new orchestra looking for proper home. *The Straits Times*.

²¹ Playing for a new image. (1983, March 18). *The Straits Times*.

over the management of the SYO, and placed it under the extra (and later co-) curricular activities department.²² With that change in management, some of the older SYO players resigned, citing disagreements with the new management style.²³

Throughout the 1980s, the SYO continued to grow and develop its identity. It commissioned and performed works by local composers such as Phoon Yew Tien, Leong Yoon Pin and Lim Chin Tiong.²⁴

Is the SYO just another CCA?

After its reorganisation under MOE, the SYO came under the baton of Vivien Goh, daughter of Goh Soon Tioe. She spent almost 10 years at the helm, but resigned in 1989. She cited the lack of commitment from its members as one of the reasons for her resignation.²⁵ She said she could not solve the challenge of the high absenteeism rates from orchestra practices.^{26 27}

“To me, absenteeism is a big problem - how can you have an orchestra when nobody comes for rehearsals? To my mind, we just cannot maintain standards when the orchestra members are distracted by this and that. I don't know about the audience but I certainly noticed a deterioration in standards,” she said.²⁸

“The students have no sense of commitment even though we give them free tuition as part of the training scheme. We are an orchestra of national standing and it leaves me thinking whether the Government should spend money on the students when they are doing something else instead of playing for the SYO,” she said, adding that the students were not making the SYO their priority.²⁹

Her resignation was a shock for many in the SYO and the local classical music industry. Her last performance was the SYO's 10th anniversary concert in April 1990^{30 31} after which Lim Yau took over as the resident conductor of the SYO.³²

Becoming national

In 2001, the SYO underwent another name change, this time to the Singapore National Youth Orchestra. Edwin Thumboo, SNYO management board member

²² Tan, S. L. (1980, October 22). Younger players hold other views on SYO. *The Straits Times*.

²³ Tan, S. L. (1980, October 22). Younger players hold other views on SYO. *The Straits Times*.

²⁴ Teacher's salute to Singapore. (1987, February 26). *The Straits Times*.

²⁵ Bose, R. (1989, August 2). Youth orchestra conductor quits. *The Straits Times*.

²⁶ Bose, R. (1989, August 2). Youth orchestra conductor quits. *The Straits Times*.

²⁷ Goh, J. (1989, August 26). Youth orchestra accepts resignation of Vivien Goh. *The Straits Times*.

²⁸ Goh, J. (1989, August 26). Youth orchestra accepts resignation of Vivien Goh. *The Straits Times*.

²⁹ Bose, R. (1989, August 2). Youth orchestra conductor quits. *The Straits Times*.

³⁰ Bose, R. (1989, August 2). Youth orchestra conductor quits. *The Straits Times*.

³¹ Kong, L. (1990, April 4). Farewell to Goh. *The Straits Times*.

³² Lim Yau is new conductor of youth orchestra. (1990, March 29). *The Straits Times*.

referred to this as not so much a renaming as giving the orchestra “its proper name”.³³ Priscylla Shaw, chairman of the board, said the adding of “national” to the name of the orchestra adds prestige and recognises the orchestra’s rightful status as a national entity.³⁴

By this time, the SNYO also had in place a rigorous structure for its members. Students typically joined the SNYO at nine years old as trainees. They would become members when they turned 12 years old. Alumni members of the SNYO were those aged 25 and above.³⁵

Joining the SNYO had many benefits for budding musicians. Not only did the orchestral training inculcate in them a passion for music, it also stretched them and widened their abilities. For instance, most SNYO members joined the orchestra with only training in the piano, but they are often directed to learn other instruments to fill in the gaps in the orchestra. Once a second instrument is identified, the musician is given two-and-a-half years of training in that instrument.³⁶

Some SNYO members have gone on to join the SSO. Among its alumni is the Tang Quartet.

Quote

*“We see these SYO musicians as a core group that will remain dedicated to music and add to the vibrancy of the art scene here, whether they go on to become professional musicians, work in related areas like music management or become an appreciative audience.” – SNYO 2001 chairman, Priscylla Shaw.*³⁷

Music directors and conductors

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|-------------|--------------------|
| 1965 - 1970 | Paul Abisheganaden |
| 1970 - 1975 | Goh Soon Tioe |
| 1980 - 1990 | Vivien Goh |
| 1990 - 2002 | Lim Yau |
| 2002 - 2005 | Robert Casteels |
| 2005 - 2010 | Lim Soon Lee |
| 2010 - 2012 | Darrell Ang |
| 2013 - 2014 | Tan Wee Sin |

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³³ Singapore National Youth Orchestra. (2001, March 31). *The Business Times*.

³⁴ Singapore National Youth Orchestra. (2001, March 31). *The Business Times*.

³⁵ Singapore National Youth Orchestra. (2001, March 31). *The Business Times*.

³⁶ Singapore National Youth Orchestra. (2001, March 31). *The Business Times*.

³⁷ Singapore National Youth Orchestra. (2001, March 31). *The Business Times*.

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Kong, L. (1990, April 4). Farewell to Goh. *The Straits Times*.

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Tan, S. L. (1979, August 21). Society that gave fillip to music and dance. *The Straits Times*.

Teacher's salute to Singapore. (1987, February 26). *The Straits Times*.