

Yew Hong Jen (游宏任): The Harmonica is my Voiceby **Kong, Kam Yoke**, written on 20th August 2010

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His name was synonymous with the harmonica in Singapore and Malaysia in the 1950s and 1960s and he won instant fame for being the first to adapt and perform the violin concerto “The Butterfly Lovers”. Harmonicist Yew Hong Jen shares his passion with us.

The violin concerto, *The Butterfly Lovers* (《梁祝协奏曲》), which premiered in 1959, might well be one of the most transposed and rearranged works in Chinese music. Other than as a concerto, the composition has also been arranged for piano solo, saw solo, xylophone solo, guzheng solo and many other versions with different combinations of instruments. A well-known harmonicist, Yew Hong Jen, whose name was synonymous with the little musical instrument in Singapore and Malaysia in the 1950s and 1960s, was credited with being the first to perform the piece on the harmonica in 1961, with the piano part arranged by composer Leong Yoon Pin. Yew won instant fame for his iconic interpretation of the complex composition.

But to many, the harmonica is hardly the instrument of choice. It probably looked cooler for most aspiring musicians to be playing the drums, the guitar or the piano. But master harmonicist Yew begged to differ, “The harmonica costs as little as \$4, is easy to handle and the player may produce different tunes and tones.”

“It is my favourite musical instrument,” said Yew. “Many people are used to the idea that enjoying music means listening to the HiFi set or going to a concert. They have neglected the joy of music-making. Villagers can make a flute out of a bamboo piece and derive tremendous joy from it. From that, you can see the primitive impulse of music.”

“The harmonica is a very expressive instrument. It is one of those rare wind instruments that could play chords. Take the chromatic harmonica that I play. It can produce half-notes and has a range of up to four octaves. Hence it can be used to play many musical compositions.”

He recalled a scene from a war documentary in which some soldiers played their harmonicas in the trench during a truce. “Nothing could more effectively emphasise the nostalgia and longing for home of the soldiers than the sound of the harmonica at the otherwise deadly silent frontline.”

The man is obviously passionate about this pocket-sized musical instrument. That should not come as a surprise for Yew had been playing the harmonica since he was eight years old. His father, a harmonica playing second-hand goods and Chinese antiques dealer, had given him a harmonica as a present while he was still studying in a school in Fujian, China. The harmonica was a most welcome gift for the boy; he used it to play songs he had been singing and to win prizes at the school’s music contests.

Yew, born in 1939, was sent to China at the age of three with his brother and sister to live with their grandparents because “my parents were too poor to look after us.” He credited his ancestors from the mountainous regions of Hakka, whom he described as being ‘obstinate and diligent

workers', for passing him a certain genetic steeliness that held him in good stead as the player of a non-traditional classical musical instrument.

Yew returned to Singapore two years later, but would once again go to China at the age of seven for his primary school education. He showed an artistic flair even as a child. He loved to draw and sing. He learnt to play many musical instruments without formal instruction. At age 10, he participated in many drama performances. He was even the conductor at sing-a-long sessions at some public gatherings.

“I was a show-off and loved to perform from a young age and also musically inclined. I was a fast learner. It did not take me long to learn how to play musical instruments, including the harmonica.”

Yew returned to Singapore yet again when he was 12 years old to continue his education. The high-achiever would always win one of the top three prizes in school competitions from writing, oratory to calligraphy. He was also a frequent performer on Rediffusion's children on-air dramas. He would perform solo on his harmonica too. He joined a harmonica group and received formal training in the instrument.

“I was already competent on the harmonica. Other musical instruments provided me with additional sources of inspiration. I actually prefer the piano and the violin. But my family could not afford these expensive instruments. The harmonica became the best medium for me to express myself.”

The music fanatic would trawl through books, listen to music records, and soak in the wealth of knowledge in music scores. He would practise days on end on his harmonica, dreaming of the day he could sound like renowned pianist Alfred Cortot and violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz.

He decided to work towards being a professional harmonicist when, in 1955, he attended a solo performance by Larry Adler, who is widely acknowledged as one of the world's most skilled harmonica players. “He made me realise the potential of the harmonica and that there was plenty of room to explore.”

He left for China once again when he was 17 and learnt playing techniques for the tremolo harmonica from master Shi Ren Wang (石人望). He soon launched his brilliant music career.

At that time, the authorities in China wanted to let “a hundred flowers bloom”. He was therefore able to move in distinguished company, and gave recitals in various Chinese cities as well as performed regularly on the Central Broadcasting Station. He even performed for guests of Mao Zedong.

The artists he associated with then included pianists Fou Tsong (傅聪) and Liu Shikun (刘诗昆), violinist Ma Sicong (马思聪), opera actor Mei Lanfang (梅兰芳) and novelist Lao She (老舍). He also met many visiting artists from Eastern Europe.

In 1957, he performed as a soloist for the first time with the Beijing Symphony Orchestra. Two years later, political conditions in China prompted him to return to Singapore, where he played

regularly at concerts and made numerous recordings for Rediffusion and the radio. He would also conduct weekly lessons on music programmes for years. He toured the region playing at concerts. With such exposure, he quickly became a well-known personality associated with promoting harmonica music on both sides of the Causeway.

Not one to be tied down by conventions, Yew was renowned for artistically merging the playing techniques of the tremolo and chromatic harmonica, resulting in a unique sound. His recitals were emotionally rich affairs full of power and grandeur, and with varied tone colours.

From the 1970s onwards, apart from his tropical fish business, he devoted his attention on giving his four children a sound musical education. He also started a harmonica school in 1975.

All his four children have obtained grade eight in music and have frequently won awards at contests. All of them, with the exception of his third son who is a computer engineer, are now music lecturers in tertiary institutions.

Yew persisted in rehearsing two to three hours daily with a pianist - usually his wife Hanna or daughter Jialing - painstakingly adapting Chinese classical and contemporary compositions originally written for solo instruments such as the violin, the oboe, the flute, the erhu and the guzheng.

He made a comeback after 14 years away from the limelight, giving a recital with his daughter Jialing accompanying him on the piano in 1984. He has not looked back since, travelling all over the world for recitals and giving harmonica lessons. His recordings of his interpretations of classical music compositions sold millions in China and Taiwan.

“Since I was a boy, I have always wanted to perform as a musician in front of an audience. That’s what I am determined to do with the rest of my life. I am a performer. To be abandoned and forgotten by my audience is very painful.”

“Fame and fortune do not matter to me any more as they did in the past. I staged a comeback only to fulfil my childhood dream. It’s purely out of an inner passion, a strong sense of mission that compels me to perform again. Music will be in my blood for as long as I live.”

“No matter how much money I may make or how successful I can be in other things, harmonica music remains my first love and I cannot give it up.”

Quote

“The sound of the harmonica is created through vibration. It is just like the vocal chords of the harmonicist, expressing our deepest feelings. I love this instrument and have devoted more than 60 years of my life to it. I shall continue to do so for the rest of my life.”

Discography

Yew Hong Jen and his Golden Harmonica (DK105)

Yew Hong Jen and his Golden Harmonica (DK109)

Yew Hong Jen and his Golden Harmonica (DK206)

Yew Hong Jen's Fantasy on Bizet's Carmen (DK109a)

《梁祝》口琴协奏曲 – 游宏任 (DK236)

Yew Hong Jen – 《西洋古典小品》 (DK262)

游宏任金口琴吹奏“金嗓子”周璇的旋律(DK10409)

游宏任金口琴吹奏 – 贝多芬浪漫曲 (DK10512)

《从古典到现代》游宏任口琴独奏会专辑 (DK1058)

游宏任复音口琴独奏 (DK10655)

游宏任金簧奏金曲(DK150509) Plays J.S. Bach – Sonata in E Flat Major

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