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Myriad possibilities

It was an experience that was to change the general perception of orchestras, of Chinese music and of ourselves as artistes in a multicultural society. If it opened doors for those directly involved with the production that night, multiple possibilities shone through the minds of the viewers. NIRMALA SESHADRI on the gala opening of the Singapore Arts Festival. The first of a two-part article.



Tan Swie Hian

AT a pre-performance reception, a group of us discusses our response to orchestral concerts. As dancers, we agree that we tend to miss the visual movement element and often feel restless mid-way. And this is going to be music we have little exposure to — a Chinese orchestra! But then, it is the gala opening of the Singapore Arts Festival; a time to reconnect with the local arts fraternity and show solidarity with the National Arts Council that is doing so much to transform this shopper's paradise into the cultural capital of Southeast Asia. With that thought we make our way into the concert hall at the new Esplanade Theatre, fondly referred to as "Durian" (a local fruit) because of its shape, which has also prompted allusions to two rather amorous porcupines.

The spectre of SARS requires us to undergo a temperature scan at the entrance passing which we are handed an "I'm Nice & Cool!" sticker.

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What follows is an experience that is to change our perception of orchestras, of Chinese music and of ourselves as artistes in a multicultural society. If it opened doors for those directly involved with the production that night, myriad possibilities shone through the minds of the viewers.

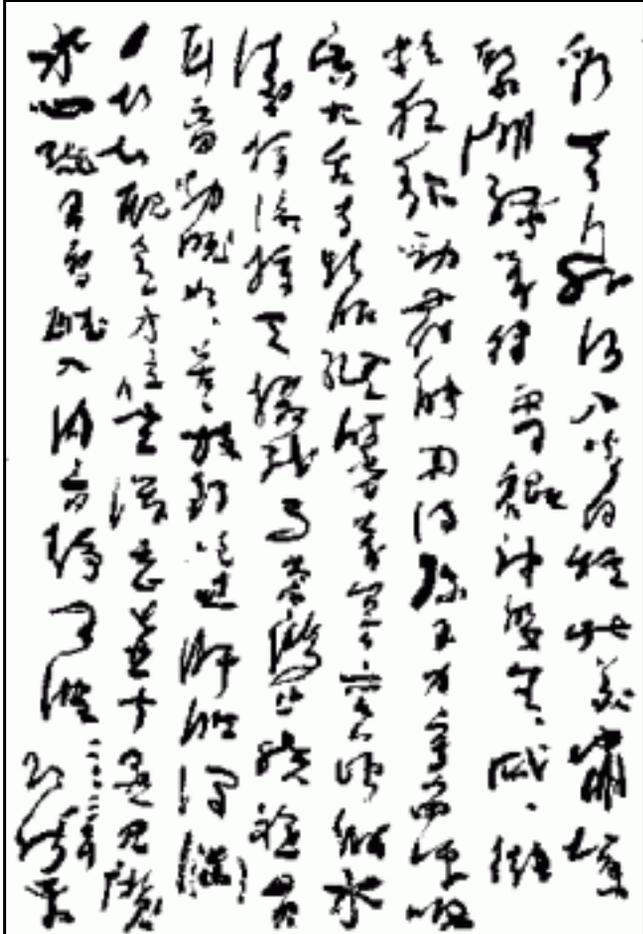
The performance "Instant is a Millennium — A Musical Conversation with Tan Swie Hian" was, like the best of artistic experimentation, both stunning and challenging. Yes, there were moments of restlessness, dips, but we had to admit that for most of the time we were sitting up straight, trying to anticipate just what might come next.

The music was by four Chinese composers who provided a wide range of styles and tomes. The opening number was dramatically *avant-garde*. At the centre of the stage a gigantic installation, intriguing in its design, revealed its representational aspects when poetry appeared on a screen. So universal in thought, it spoke of the inter-connectedness in life and of love that is to be shared by all. "The Celestial Web" was indeed a very moving opening to a dialogue between Singapore's most celebrated multi-disciplinary artist — poet, sculptor, artist, calligrapher, set and costume designer Tan Swie Hian, and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra.

As each piece unfolded one became aware of an intricate tapestry of visual art with its multifarious possibilities in a digital age, of lighting techniques, of poetry, and of music. In "Divine Melody", we witnessed an oil painting being created in time to the music but sans the artist.

Brilliant use of digital technology made it seem as if an invisible hand was at work. The last piece saw the coming together of the Chinese art of calligraphy with music. The "running" style in Chinese calligraphy emphasises deft, flowing brush strokes, with the characters often linked to one another, thus creating a strong sense of ongoing movement. This was the only piece in which Swie Hian himself appeared on stage — in a short *kurta*, a pair of bermudas and sandals — to complete an entire poem of 140 Chinese characters in less than five minutes. The moment was so intense — the hall sat with bated breath as he bent over the 12-foot long sheet of rice paper and moved with great speed and strength. The image was projected on a large screen behind him. For the most part, the music was at the level of a hum, but as he approached the end of the poem, the conductor swung his arm with increasing intensity. An instant had attained the proportions of an entire millennium.

By the end of it all, I knew I couldn't walk away without meeting the man who had brought it all together. Tan Swie Hian is an enthusiastic communicator and excitedly told me how he had visited India as a distinguished visitor of the Indian government and that he felt he must have been an Indian in his last birth.



"Yellow River at Hukou -- In the Metre of Qin Yuan Chun", Tan Swie Hian, calligraphy, ink on paper, 2003.

Swie Hian is the recipient of numerous local and international awards, most recently the World Economic Forum's Crystal Award. But beyond it all, he is a symbol of warmth, gentleness, simplicity and pure joy. Excerpts from an interview with Tan Swie Hian

How would you define yourself — a painter, writer, sculptor, poet... all of the above and more?

I am a free soul! (*laughs heartily*)

How did you arrive at the title "Instant is a Millennium"?

The title was chosen by Tsung Yeh from my calligraphic work "Instant is a Millennium; Enlightenment to Eternity". The same living entity could, on different planes, experience two states of mind: the secular plane where time and the planetary system are perceived to be always on the move, and the sacred plane where time is completely still so that a thought is held in eternity. When one is enlightened all phenomenal objects become one, and one is simultaneously found in all.

Your poetry tends to hinge on the religious. Do you sometimes wonder if this could alienate segments of your audience?

I am religious. It comes from my heart naturally. A truly religious person will always be loved. "Buddhist" is written on my forehead. I feel I have to portray who I am, not what the audience likes. In the end, it all connects to the core. When you dig deep into the ground, somewhere you discover that the source is one.

But I would rather look at my work as being more universal and spiritual in nature than religious. When the human mind is enlightened, it is immersed in white light (*that's what the first poem spoke about*). We create art to break the white light into a rainbow of colours. You know, a good painting somehow adjusts itself to the requirement of the viewer.

In "Celestial Web", you used the "wink" of a butterfly which was a very subtle but profound imagery. Why the butterfly?

In Chinese culture, the butterfly is a very powerful symbol of love,

wisdom, mutability and beauty. I also used the concept of Gaia, to portray the earth as a living organism. Don't you think it is more poetic than religious? I don't use the word "God", but Goddesses, they are everywhere!

The final piece must have been very tense and strenuous. How did you manage it?

Calligraphy is a kind of yoga. I am 60 years old and look! *(He shows me his fully developed calf muscles).*

It is like a state of *samadhi*, you are not yourself. In five minutes I had to write more than 110 characters.

As I climbed up those steps, I was chanting. You just move into a different plane. Art is a kind of vehicle to find the diamond in the heart. Mine is the art of happiness.

But what about angst — do you ever find that coming through in your art?

Mine is not an expression of personal restlessness, not anymore. Before 1973, I was an angry young man.

(The year 1973 appears to have been a turning point in Swie Hian's spiritual journey. It is at this point that he feels he attained spiritual illumination.)

I felt very transparent, one with the universe, with the moth flying in the sky. I was initially frightened. I couldn't find myself. I started writing. Gradually, I started to enjoy being one with everything.

(Swie Hian, a graduate of English literature worked for 24 years as press attaché at the French Embassy in Singapore. As soon as he felt that he had saved enough money to guarantee his financial security, he left his job to live a simple life of art and meditation.)

I don't paint for money. When I have something to say, I paint.

(After he had completed the calligraphy of his poem "The Yellow River At Hukou", Swie Hian didn't even stop to look at his work. He waved, turned back and walked down the steps.)

Life is like that. All in preparation for the big bye bye!



Can you share your connection with India?

Prince Siddhartha is Indian! Because of him, I love India. India is so close to my heart *(he puts his hand to his chest and the expression on his face tells it all)*. In India, I felt so well understood.

I have always felt that the moment man knows how to beautify or ornament himself, he ceases to be animal. Indians really know how to beautify themselves. It is a journey from beauty to spirituality. There is a whole spiritual system in India.

(Incidentally, Swie Hian has translated extensively into Mandarin works of Indian philosophers such as Ramana Maharishi, J.Krishnamurti, Sri Aurobindo and N.Chaitanya.)

Indian versus Chinese culture?

Spirituality versus Pragmatism.

Your advice to the younger generation of artistes in Singapore?

Free your minds. You are naturally multi-disciplinary. To free the mind, you have to meditate. Then the energy just flows through you. Look at J.Krishnamurti's writing- the diction and rhythm just fall into place!

I feel the future artist will be born with no crooked features, and is healthy and resourceful, and with all other aspects combined to make one feel like hugging him at first sight!

(To be continued)

Nirmala Seshadri is a Bharatanatyam dancer and recipient of the Singapore National Arts Council's "Young Artist Award".

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