

There is a growing number of orchestras here and their repertoire is not limited to just traditional classical music



Akshita Nanda

The classical music scene here is striking a vibrant chord as new ensembles of professionals and amateurs offer concert-goers more options than before.

To attract audiences, many are going beyond traditional repertoire. For its debut, the newly formed Metropolitan Festival Orchestra will be playing a live soundtrack to *The Fellowship Of The Ring* movie at The Star Performing Arts Centre in June this year.

Two decades ago, there was just the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) and a few community orchestras, such as the Singapore Wind Symphony and Braddell Heights Symphony Orchestra. Now, Singapore is home to a dozen musical groups which are critically acclaimed here and overseas.

Set up earlier this year, the Metropolitan Festival Orchestra joins a growing number of all-professional ensembles headlined by freelance musicians as well as current members of the SSO. These include the re:mix chamber orchestra, founded in 2006 – its first CD released last year was among Life!'s top picks of the year – the Take 5 Piano Quintet, founded in 2007, and the three-year-old Orchestra and Voices of the East Indies.

Then there are recognised semi-pro orchestras of students and professional performers, such as The Philharmonic Orchestra, founded in 1998, and the five-year-old Orchestra of the Music Makers. The latter is made up of music students who just want to keep playing, yet their passion and technique were good enough to land the group the role of resident orchestra at two noted British music festivals last July – the Lichfield Music and Cheltenham Music festivals.

All this is happening against a backdrop of buoyant attendances at classical concerts. Even flagship orchestra SSO has had an infusion of new blood and wants to reach out to new audiences through live performances of film soundtracks.

It is an exciting time for music lovers such as Dr Geh Min, 63, former president of the Nature Society. "I have been attending concerts since the early 1970s, but they were few and far between till the inception of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra," she says. "There are so many orchestras now. I've heard all sorts."

Health-care consultant Joshua Goh, 62, a fan of the Orchestra of the Music Makers, says: "Technically, they may be amateurs, but their passion overflows. The sense you get with the performance is that it is something the performers enjoy doing as opposed to work."

Music watchers say the growing number of musical ensembles here is a consequence of better infrastructure, such as more music programmes in schools and new venues for performance, including the School of the Arts and The Star Performing Arts Centre in Buona Vista, which opened last November.

Nanyang Academy of Fine Art's (Nafa) head of music and founder of The Philharmonic Orchestra, Lim Yau, 60, points to the fact that he had to go overseas to London's Royal College of Music to study. Today, students can apply to the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music or Nafa, which has offered a degree with the Royal College of Music since 2011.

He says: "When you have colleges that produce graduates, they naturally are going to be a driving force. The essence of being an artist is that you want to perform. When you have enough people who are hungry to perform, they will organise themselves."

Being based overseas does not stop Singapore



NEW WORLD of SYMPHONIES

musicians from organising or participating in ensembles here. Cellist Ng Yu-Ting, 39, has been in the Murcia Symphony Orchestra in southern Spain for the last eight years, but will return here this June to play with the Metropolitan Festival Orchestra.

She misses home and hopes to find more career

opportunities here. "Singapore has changed quite a lot. There are more orchestras, more opportunities to play. All these did not exist when I left," she says.

Conductor, baritone and composer Ng Tian Hui, 33, has been in the United States for five years and is currently director of orchestral activities and lecturer in music at Mount Holyoke College.

However, the former teacher at Ang Mo Kio Secondary School missed playing with friends here so much that he set up the Orchestra and Voices of the East Indies in 2010, performing Handel's *Messiah* with 20 singers and musicians at The Arts House. Last December, the group did two *Magnificats*, one by Bach and another by the lesser-known Bohemian composer Jan Dismas Zelenka.

Another concert of lesser-known composers is planned for December, but Ng would like to do more, time and funds permitting. "A lot of this music just hasn't been done in Singapore, it's fabulous music and I'd like to share it," he says.

Ng also wants to share the talents of his friends – many teachers in schools here – who rarely get to perform professionally. "What happens to our local talent? Unless you've won a competition, you're not going to be invited to perform with the SSO or overseas, but how will they win competitions if these people are not even getting a chance to perform?"

Similarly, the Metropolitan Festival Orchestra brings together artists who performed together for several years at local arts festivals under the National Arts Council's Singapore Festival Orchestra, and who now also want to perform in projects of their own.

The Metropolitan Festival Orchestra is set up as a commercial company that hires freelance musicians for ensemble projects of various sizes – nearly 100 will be on stage for *The Fellowship Of The Ring* concert in June.

The orchestra plans two major concerts of its own a year. To stay solvent, it hires itself out for other projects, including a March 23 gig at business school Insead's leadership conference and a June 1 performance funded by music patron Kris Tan, accompanying Japanese pianist Miyuki Washimiya.

"We're not trying to be a full season orchestra yet," says general manager and executive producer Low Jia Hua, 33, who is a Yong Siew Toh Conservatory graduate. "We'll do the projects that need a professional orchestra to come in the week before and do the job."

"There will always be things that the SSO cannot do because it has a season that it plans 18 months in advance," adds conductor Chan Tze Law, 49, who is music director of the Metropolitan Festival Orchestra as well as the Orchestra of the Music Makers. "There is a demand for our sort of orchestra. It's

grown to the point where we can't help ourselves but start it."

Interest in classical music performances is increasing. The SSO reported a turnout of 80,000 for its last season, which was up 3 per cent from the season before. Houses have been 84 per cent full on average in the past 12 months.

The Philharmonic Orchestra reports 70 per cent attendance at most concerts, but like other ensembles here, hopes to reach beyond an established audience of students and regular concert-goers. Doing this requires thinking out of the box: Its New Year's Eve gala concerts in 2011 and last year included champagne, crackers and balloons released at midnight. In June, it will collaborate with local dancers to present Stravinsky's *The Rite Of Spring*.

The SSO is not lagging in this race for outreach. In July, it will bring in two new associate conductors



The Metropolitan Festival Orchestra will play a live soundtrack as *The Fellowship Of The Ring* is shown on a giant screen.

with experience in this area: Singaporean Joshua Kangming Tan, 36, who helmed several educational concert programmes in Beijing as resident conductor of the National Center of Performing Arts Orchestra from 2010 to last year, and Briton Jason Lai, 39, who is currently the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestra's principal conductor.

In August, Lai will headline a concert of all movie soundtracks by the SSO, while Tan will conduct the SSO's first concert of all-anime music next February.

SSO general manager Anthony Brice, 36, is also considering live performances of film soundtracks. Last June's screening of underwater documentary *Blue Planet Live!* brought in a new audience, he says.

Adds Mr Brice: "Right now, we're just beginning to talk about concerts with broader reach. Whether they are soundtracks from Bond movies or music for silent films, maybe this audience will come in only once in three years, but they come and they know there is a national orchestra." akshitan@sph.com.sg

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