

[The Star Online](#) > Features

Sunday December 5, 2004

Composing a Malaysian win

BY JASON CHEAH

IT was an unusual night at the Dewan Philharmonik Petronas at KLCC. The performances that night weren't for the typical classical music enthusiast who loves his romantics and classics and his baroque pieces. They were for those who wanted to expand their musical horizons, and those interested in what new composers have to offer.

It was Nov 27, the night the inaugural Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra (MPO) International Composers Award was decided.

Led by conductor Kevin Field, who is also associate director of the MPO, the orchestra performed the works of the five composers who had made it through the preliminary round to this final reckoning.

In the end, Malaysian Chong Kee Yong's *The Starry Night's Ripples* won the award, and the 33-year-old from Johor received US\$30,000 (RM114,000) for his effort.

According to the sole judge Brett Dean (an internationally-recognised Australia-based composer), Chong's piece had the variety and sonority that he was looking for. It wasn't what the audience was looking for, though. The Audience Choice award went to 29-year-old Moritz Eggert from Germany, who received US\$3,000 (RM11,400).



Chong Kee Yong's composition, *The Starry Night's Ripples*, won the inaugural Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra International Composers Award.

His *Number Nine IV: Scapa Flow* had a distinctly movie-like feel to it. Unlike the music expert, perhaps the general music lover in the audience went for that familiarity despite having, presumably, turned up to hear new music.

Besides, it's all subjective, after all. One listener might be moved by melody, another by visual impressions. Or you could chose to dwell on abstract rather than cohesive focus or vice versa.

It was certainly visual impressions that dominated the second half of the night. Japanese composer Dai Fujikura's work, *Calling Timbuktu*, for instance, was presented in a very different way: the musicians were seated surrounding the audience. This had something to do with the fact that while studying in Britain, Fujikura was too poor to afford the expensive good seats in concert halls!

Then there was Eggert's presentation: the brass section was seated on the balcony above the main audience – quite a spectacle, sonic-wise.

Aurally, however, did there seem to be a pervading "sameness" to much of the music?

Perhaps, perhaps not. While one could argue that Mexican Carlos Sanchez-Gutierrez's *Afterlight*, Canadian Paul Frehner's *Subliminal Media* and Chong and Fujikura's pieces may perhaps have

trodden similar emotional paths, Eggert's film-influenced piece certainly didn't.

One can't fault the composers' sheer sincerity, though, especially when they explained what influenced their works.

The 40-year-old Sanchez-Gutierrez, for instance, spoke of his *Afterlights* as an example of a rather abstract composition based on concrete experience, in this case the dance of fireflies.

While Chong's *The Starry Night's Ripples* was inspired by Vincent van Gogh's famous painting, *Starry Night*, it also paid tribute to three composers – Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), Gyorgy Ligeti (1923-) and Salvatore Sciarrino (1947-) – and was a dedication to his wife.

For Frehner, 34, it was the nature of musical development that was important; his intention with *Subliminal Media* was to create a musical experience comparable to a series of natural transformations.

The 27-year-old Fujikura's orchestral writing and placement of musicians tried to bring out all the energy of chamber groups within *Calling Timbuktu*.

Eggert's *Scapa Flow* was inspired by a report on the World War I incident when the interned German navy scuttled most of its High Seas Fleet in Scapa Flow, a sheltered lagoon encircled by the Orkney Islands that was used as a northern base by the British.

Such wildly varied influences reflect the truly international nature of this competition.

The award's intention of celebrating new music from around the world was certainly realised when over 90 entries from 42 countries poured in earlier in the year.

This award is a triennial event marking the end of each two-year cycle of the MPO Forum for Malaysian Composers.

However, that isn't to say that a Malaysian won the award just because it was initiated and hosted in Malaysia.

Chong's composition still had to fight its way past all the other international entries to make it to Nov 27. And it certainly received no special consideration when Dean judged the final five on that night.

Chong's win underlines the fact that Malaysian composers have blossomed over the past two decades – and that, perhaps, we no longer live in quite such a “cultural desert”, as some people put it. The Malaysian Composers Forum itself had four finalists from dozens of applications. And all four (Adeline Wong, Ahmad Muriz Che Rose, Johan Othman, and Chong) have had works featured or commissioned internationally.

Then there's Tazul Izan Tajuddin, who won the prestigious Toru Takemitsu Award in Japan two years ago.

Accompanying this blossoming of our composers is the growing maturity of the classical music audience. Despite the somewhat safe Audience Choice Award choice made by this night's audience, for instance, it was an exemplary audience.

As MPO general manager C. Stephen Smith said, this audience was by far the most attentive and dedicated: you could hear a pin drop between each performance; and the applause came at the

proper time: only when Field's hands had dropped after the last note of each composition had been played.

The Audience Choice Award, with its very serious prize money, is a way of encouraging further growth through involvement.

Certainly, the audience's presence helped show these five pieces off to their best advantage. Dean agreed, pointing out that the live spectacle is much better than judging the compositions by just reading the score or listening to a taped demo.

In performing a totally unfamiliar repertoire – it was nothing like running through the classics, that's for sure! –before this audience, the MPO demonstrated an admirable cohesiveness.

That bodes well for the future, especially when the new MPO principal conductor/artistic director, Matthias Bamert, takes over at the start of the 2005/06 season in August from outgoing principal conductor/artistic director, Kees Bakels.

© 1995-2004 Star Publications (Malaysia) Bhd (Co No 10894-D)