



A public bus passes by a damaged 100-year-old banyan tree in Jakarta October 4, 2006. The governor of Jakarta filed a complaint with police after a Muslim youth group hacked and damaged a 100-year-old banyan tree in the Indonesian capital in a bid to dispel rumours the tree harbours special powers.

Seeing the forest for the banyan trees

Music with the power to change the world?

2008 MAY BE a tragic year for the world economy but the silver lining is surely our contemporary music scene, which has made strides over the past twelve months. One of the leading contributors is undeniably Chong Kee Yong, who has continued his prize-winning streak, first in the Intersonanzen Brandenburgisches Fest der Neuen Musik 2008 in Berlin where he won second prize for his *Metamorphosis VIII* for Sheng and ensemble, and most recently at the International Composition Prize Luxembourg 2008 where he took third prize for his *Phoenix Calling* for Sheng and ensemble.

Malaysia is emerging as a nation with a notable contemporary music scene, and we are fast gaining a reputation at international events such as the Asian Composers League festival and the recent International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) World Music Days in Lithuania, which heard Chong's orchestral work *Splattered Landscape II*.

Chong has again scored two successes for Malaysia, with outstanding CD releases by the Belgian ensemble, Het Collectief,

which feature his work. 'Het Collectief is the first Belgium ensemble who officially commissioned me to write for them. Our friendship started from my early career as a composer. Wibert is a very supportive friend as well as an excellent violinist who dares to explore different types of music-writing in violin repertoire. I owe him a lot during the composing of *For another better world*,' says Chong of his keenest collaborators.

This brings Chong's appearances on internationally released recordings to a total of six (one is out of print). With each effort, it's really Malaysia's name that gets put on the world music scene. It is therefore perplexing that government officials recently asked Chong what he had done for his country. Do we really have to hurl ourselves into space in order to get some recognition around here?

Violin Faces:
Chong - For another better world
Hartmann - 2nd Sonata
Zimmermann - Sonata



Het Collectief



Berio – Sequenza VIII
Wibert Aerts, violin
(Fuga Libera FUG 704)

Wibert Aerts is the Het Collectief violinist who has put together a solo disc of contemporary violin works that otherwise might not get much airtime. In doing so he extends the tradition of violin solo music from Bach to Ysaye to the current age.

No work expresses this connection more than Chong's, which employs the BACH motif in his complex canvass of sounds. 'It develops gradually from a single-line statement to a more complex interlocution between lines or motivic elements in portrayal of two different worlds that cannot be separated regardless,' says Chong about the piece.

In many ways Chong's work stands out from the otherwise European programme for its many shades of colour and flexible, almost imperceptible, sense of time. It's a work that cries out for change in a world careening into destruction because of the greed and inhumanity of those who crave and cling to power, and it is enunciated in the most subtle of materials that can be surprisingly lyrical in places. One is reminded of viewing a black and white Chinese painting with a magnifying glass, discovering the fine brush strokes and the shades of colour where ink bleeds into paper grain.

It is a wonderful afterthought to an excellent programme put together by Aerts that begins with the somewhat more formal and traditional Sonata by Hartmann, building to the gnawing intensity of Berio's famous *Sequenza VIII* for solo violin.

Aerts is a sensitive performer who brings unique insights to the pieces, from the rhythmic impulses of the Hartmann and Zimmermann, to the minimalistic power of the Berio. The latter is the climax of this

disc, and here Aerts brings wonderful shades to the repeated notes that Berio took trouble to colour individually through various fingerings and stoppings.

Chong then takes Berio's technical challenge a step further, and it is to Aerts' credit that he navigates the composers many subtle shades, achieved through a myriad of techniques not even the most celebrated soloists can sometimes achieve, with a finesse that seems almost second nature.



Messiaen: Quatuor Pour La Fin Du Temps
Chong: Mourning the Murder of an Old Banyan Tree
Het Collectief
(Fuga Libera FUG 540)

It's *that* piece again that the Malaysian Philharmonic fears so much, through strange and twisted logic. Celebrating French composer Olivier Messiaen's centenary, the ensemble consisting of flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano pays tribute to one of his most poignant masterpieces.

There are a number of options for the work currently in print, but none as special as this one, because of its pairing of Chong's remarkable *Mourning the Murder of an Old Banyan Tree*, which also calls for piccolo, alto flute, tam tam, Thai gong and bass clarinet.

'Long ago, I read a poem, *Balade Terbunuhnya Beringin Tua di Sebuah Bandaraya* by Usman Awang, and this poem kept me thinking of what good civilisation has brought us, and also destroys so much of us! I'm very afraid of losing our traditions, our culture, our language, our environment, our planet to the idea that "development" is unavoidable ...,' says Chong.

The work is an anguished painting of a bleak landscape, dark and troubled, where primal cries go unheeded. The programme notes call Chong 'a magician of sounds' and I can think of no better description for the piece, which is haunting; an elegy that aptly

follows the anguish of Messiaen's more vehement mourning of a similar sort of destruction.

'In the Buddhist idiom, the banyan tree represents a consciousness of intelligence and a consciousness of way,' adds Chong. In a way, his subtle approach reflects this philosophy, and faithfully translates Awang's touching simplicity from text to timbre:

*Selamat tinggal, kupu-kupu sayang
Selamat tinggal, wahai burung-burung
bersarang ...
Namaku beringin pohon tua yang terbang,
Dimusuhi oleh rancangan bernama
Pembangunan
- Usman Awang*

That the work caps Messiaen's remarkable quartet is something all Malaysians should celebrate. Het Collectief presents a rather special account of this masterpiece, and excels in the interplay of instrumental lines that occur throughout the piece – sample, for example, the exquisite conversations between the quartet in fourth movement or the deep forest calls of the hushed nocturnal opening movement.

One of the stars of the performance is surely the clarinet, relishing in the birdsong that underpins the work, especially in the first movement and in the intense soliloquy of *Abyss of the Birds*. Another moment of sheer beauty is the sublime Fifth movement with its moving cello canzona against forlorn chords on the piano that at moments approaches a surprisingly romantic intensity.

In all, two discs you should not miss this year, available at www.fugalibera.com ■

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