

SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER LEE KUAN YEW
AT THE OPENING OF VICTORIA CONCERT HALL
ON WEDNESDAY, 1 OCT 80

Two and a half years ago, in May 1978, the Cabinet considered a paper to set up the Singapore Symphonia Company to run a Chamber Orchestra. It boiled down to financial support for the salary of its members estimated at \$1 million annually, the provision of scholarships for promising musicians who might become members, the refurbishing of the Victoria Memorial Hall at an estimated \$1.5 million, and the appointment of a board and a manager to attend to the administration and to raise funds from private sources. I thought at the time that the financial estimates were understated. I have not been disappointed.

National Archives of Singapore

For over 12 years, we have had fitful starts and stops with orchestras of amateurs led by part-time conductors. The Cabinet paper estimated that it would take 11 years before Singapore would have a full symphony orchestra with 70 players, and one which would deserve a full-sized concert hall. I thought then that this was optimistic. Within a year, the Minister for Culture

submitted a proposal in principle, for a cultural centre at the Kallang Basin tip of Marina Central. We deferred a decision on it.

I now take pleasure in formally declaring this concert hall open. It is an interim home for the SSO until the 1990s. It is a small but high quality concert hall. It can swell the numbers of regular concert goers. Orchestras on their way to Australia, Japan or Hongkong can be enticed to stop over for two or three performances. Next, there are orchestras in Hong Kong and Manila with whom the SSO can exchange visits. When the SSO has got its act together, it can play to audiences in Sydney, Melbourne, Tokyo and Seoul.

The SSO after 1½ years has established a good following among Singapore's music lovers. Many believe it can achieve a standard comparable to orchestras in Japan, given a few more years. Its success depends on good management, a practical, business-like, down to earth approach to the innumerable problems of assembling musicians from Asia, America, and Europe, and getting them to mesh into a team. It is the time immemorial problem of which comes first, the chicken or the egg. How does the SSO build up an ever larger following to encourage good musicians and attract better ones, unless the SSO already has good musicians? Singaporeans are of migrant stock. Their forebearers come from countries without a ear accustomed to European music,

nor have they any experience of handling European musical instruments at home. Nevertheless, the phenomenal success in America and Europe of Japanese and Korean musicians, especially violinists and pianists, lend hope to more blossomings of the musical endowments of Asians. The question is how to identify such natural talent early enough to train and convert them to professionals. I suspect, however, that we shall never persuade enough to elect to be professional musicians. Parents want their children to be tutored in music, and the young like it, judging from the response to school bands and large numbers of children privately tutored in the violin and the piano to be examined by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. Parents and their children want their musical accomplishments to be an adornment to a solidly based professional career. Even if they do not want to be professional musicians, parents and teachers should encourage their wards to develop a feel for music by attending SSO rehearsals and concerts. There is no better way than by watching and listening to how musicians practise, what they practise, to know what it takes to become a good musician.

It is instructive to know how many orchestras other societies support: 116 million Japanese have 14 professional symphony orchestras; 14.2 million Australians have 7; 3.8 million Israelis have 5; 37.6 million South Koreans have 3; 47.7 million Filipinos have 5.

Since the Japanese have no tradition with Western musical instruments, it is not unreasonable to take them as our base line. On their population to players ratio, we should have 20 musicians of international standard, or about one-third of a symphony orchestra of at least 70 players.

Are we likely to produce 20 professional musicians of Japanese standards? The SSO has 7 Singaporeans out of 52. Hongkong's orchestra, with a population of about 5 million, has 23 Chinese out of an orchestra of 74 after 6 years of existence. The conductor of our orchestra was born in Sumatra, educated in Singapore, trained and nurtured in Europe, and eventually induced to return to Singapore. If we are Singaporean chauvinists, we shall never have a good SSO. I was therefore disturbed to discover that out of 15 on scholarship in Europe, Australia and America, the SSO Board selected 13 Singaporeans. Surely we do not have a monopoly of musical talent. It is not reasonable to expect hard-headed Singaporeans, who have the talent, to take up music as their career. A study of musical memory in piano playing in *The Musical Quarterly* 1915 has calculated that a concert pianist must know a minimum of 20 pieces flawlessly, each around 20 minutes in duration, and another 100 well enough to be brought to perfection with some effort. In 20 minutes, a pianist will play 10,000 notes, each synchronised, each in the correct timing, each exactly the correct one of the 88 notes on the piano. It required

absolute perfection in memory retrieval. To achieve this high professionalism, the best musicians begin training from the age of 3-5. It is a long and rigorous road even for the gifted. Few gifted Singaporeans, with such good mind, ear and touch, will want to chance their careers in music. Any person with a mind capable of committing 120 20-minutes pieces of music to memory, and a deft touch, can easily meet the demands of most traditional professional; they can become surgeons, doctors, lawyers, or engineers, professions which provide a rewarding life, without continually disciplined efforts. Hence, we must cast our net wide over all of Asia to find enough men with the musical gifts and the urge to make music their life.

Further down the road the problem is, having identified the gifted and trained them abroad into top musicians, how to keep them in Singapore. We have one violinist and four pianists concertising in Europe and America. Until they know they have scaled and reached their highest peaks, they will remain in America and Western Europe, wealthy populations (with per capita GNP of between US\$6,000 and US\$9,000 per annum) of about 250 million each lying across a 7-hour jet-flight ocean. They will return to Singapore only for the annual filial visit. To be sure, eventually all will marry and have families to raise. Perhaps by them, like Choo Huey, they would have fulfilled their musical ambitions, and would widen, rather than raise, their sights. They would begin to

weigh not only what Singapore can offer for their musical skills, but what Singapore can provide for their children.

Unless the philosophy that guides the SSO is as realistic and hard-earned as that which was prevailed over the government in the last 21 years, the SSO Board will forever be chasing a phantom orchestra.

In short, the SSO needs a tough-minded business philosophy. The values and priorities of talented Singaporeans are deeply imbedded. For nearly all of them, music is an avocation, not a vocation. Avocation sounds much better than a hobby. Therefore, it was right that the SSO recruited good musicians worldwide. Those who take to Singapore and are prepared to train and teach our young, we welcome to stay on indefinitely. Those with brilliant careers in Europe and America, we shall be proud to have known them before they become famous. The key is to get enough who are professionally competent and are prepared to devote their lives to making music, diffusing musical appreciation and spreading the knowledge of musical techniques and skills. The language of music transcends race, religion and culture. If we get enough of those who speak this language fluently and are prepared to teach our young how to speak it well, the SSO will succeed.

SYMPHONY ORCHESTRAS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Country	Estimated mid-1979 population	No. of professional symphony orchestras	Population per professional symphony orchestra	No. of professional symphony orchestras we can expect to have in Singapore, if Singaporeans were equally talented		No. of Singaporean professional symphony musicians we can expect to have, if Singaporean were equally talented
				No. of full symphony orchestras	As percentage of a full symphony orchestra	
	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d) = 2.36m/(c)*	(e) = (d) x 100%	(e) = (d) x 70**
South Korea	37.60m	3	12,533,000	0.19	19%	13
Philippines	47.72m	5	9,544,000	0.25	25%	18
Japan	115.87m	14	8,276,000	0.29	29%	20
Australia	14.2m	7	2,029,000	1.16	116%	81
Israel	3.78m	5	756,000	3.12	312%	218

* Singapore's mid-1979 population is estimated at 2.36m.

** Average size of a full symphony orchestra is taken as 70 musicians.