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SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, SECRETARY-GENERAL, NTUC AND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER ON TUESDAY, 26 MAY 1992 AT THE APPRECIATION DINNER FOR THE DONORS TO THE SLF WORKERS' CULTURAL FUND AT MANDARIN COURT D, MANDARIN HOTEL AT 8.20 PM

For nearly thirty years, Singaporeans have been busy with economic survival. Today, we have more than met our basic needs in life. Besides full employment and higher incomes, Singaporeans have more time for leisure. We have begun to turn to the finer things in life. We have begun to learn to appreciate culture and the arts.

2 The number of arts performances has more than doubled from just over 750 in 1985 to nearly 1,700 last year. The number of visual arts exhibitions has also increased from some 160 in 1985 to more than 250 last year.

3 More importantly, our children are getting greater exposure to the arts. Many parents enrol their children in commercial dance and music schools. Private music tuition is an extensive activity in Singapore today.

4 More than 1,000 of our brightest students are enrolled in the arts elective courses at secondary and junior college levels each year. Enrolments in the La Salle School of Arts and the Nanyang Academy of Fine

Arts have increased more than 50%, from less than 950 in 1985 to more than 1500 last year. Many schools have symphonic bands, string orchestras and Chinese Orchestras. Drama and dance activities in schools are also popular as ECA.

5 The increasing number of students learning music and art will lead to a growing audience base for the performing arts. In order to build an artistically vibrant community, we must gather the support and contributions of everyone in Singapore including the artistic community, the private sector, and the government.

6 Artists need financial support. Composers, playwrights and artistes cannot live on bread and water alone. This is true today as it was in the past.

7 In fact, without the financial support and patronage of the Church, the royal courts of Europe and wealthy aristocrats, the world would not have known of Bach, Mozart or Beethoven. Without the generous financial support of Lorenzo de Medici, the well-known patron of the arts in 15th-century Florence, the outstanding works of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo would not exist today.

8 The story goes that Medici was so impressed by a 15-year old pupil at the school of sculpture which he had set up, that he took the boy home and brought him up

like his own son. This boy was Michelangelo. We too have similar stories in Singapore. The late violinist Goh Soon Tioe was in a coffee shop in Chinatown one day when he saw a boy playing with a toy violin the boy had made himself. Goh Soon Tioe was impressed by the boy's talent. He took him home and gave this boy free music lessons. The boy was Lee Pan Hon, who later grew up to become an accomplished violinist.

9 Lee and many of our other accomplished artistes now live abroad, because the arts environment here cannot yet support their aspirations and high ideals. If we want to see the arts flourish in Singapore, we must have more people like Medici and Goh Soon Tioe as well as successful citizens and corporate citizens who will give generously to nurture and develop artists and arts groups.

10 Some people have asked why we should be listening to symphonies of Beethoven and Mozart, or watching ballerinas dancing to the music of "Swan Lake" when these come from cultures far away from our home? When we promote the arts, whose art are we promoting?

11 No doubt that the arts should transcend language and cultural boundaries. But at the same time, there is no reason why we should not actively encourage artistes to create works that Singaporeans can identify with. Why can't we have our own violin concertos and

symphonies based on the themes of our folk songs like "Di-Tanjong Katong", "Singapura", "Radiant Orchids", "Rasa Sayang" and "Voices from the Heart"? Culture comes from the people and belongs to the people. It is an expression of the voices and aspirations of ordinary people.

12 There are many talents in the region. We have a world-class orchestra and an active dance company in Singapore. We have developed much of the 'hardware', but good local 'software' is still often lacking. Our theatre groups and painters are perhaps more successful in this respect. More and more Singapore plays are being staged. The audience for such productions is also growing. However, more needs to be done to promote our musical compositions. While it is good for our musicians and dancers to perform well-known western compositions, it would be even better if they could include our own works in their repertoire from time to time.

## National Archives of Singapore

13 NTUC is presently making preparations for a May Day Concert Premiere in 1994. It will feature works based on our own folk songs and music. The labour movement will commission composers to write music that will have a uniquely Singaporean flavour. We hope the result will be a 'Singaporean' concert appreciated by all Singaporeans. And when we come to cultural exchanges in the future, we will have more to exchange with.

14 To date, the SLF Workers' Cultural Fund has raised more than S\$2.8 million. I am happy with the results. Contributions from the labour movement made up \$1.7 million, or 62% of the total pledged so far. The remaining \$1.1 million were donated by corporate and individual donors.

15 Our ultimate target is to raise S\$10 million to support cultural and arts activities in Singapore, for the benefit of our workers. Of course, we don't expect to raise that amount overnight. We understand that there are many other deserving organisations that also need donations to fund their activities. We are grateful to the generous donors who have donated to our Cultural Fund and hope that you will continue to do so, especially during your good years.

16 On that note, may I wish you a pleasant evening.

Thank you.

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