

## HYPERMARKET

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MUSIC  
BY CH LOH



# WE BUILT THIS CITY

Malaysia's first ever contemporary music festival celebrates city life in a big way. A sneak preview

SOUTHEAST ASIAN CITIES have seen remarkable drama over the past year, from the shroud of vapourised vegetation and no small amount of charred animal remains and fossil fuels that suffocated KL like a winter blanket for a good few months past; to the endless street dramas that unfolded in Bangkok; to the shattering blast that ripped through ordinary lives in Jakarta. It seems the only

one thing that eludes us cityfolk is peace and quiet. It is therefore quite natural that when Goethe Institut-Malaysia approached the Malaysian Composers Collective for a music project that would fit into their Cityscapes theme that had been shaping up over the past year, it found composers with plenty to say about the life around them, stories waiting to be told, begging to be heard.

*Urban Soundscapes* thus became the central theme of our country's very first KL Contemporary Music Festival 09 (KLCMF 09), a three-day celebration of everything that is new in contemporary classical music, created by living composers from Malaysia and around the region. Each composer will contribute a piece to the huge tapestry of sounds and experiences that hopefully will

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**Above, left to right** Pedestrians cross an overhead bridge at night in Central, Hong Kong October 20, 2008; Pedestrians and shoppers walk through the Russian Market in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on June 16, 2008. Named for the expatriates who shopped there in the 1980s, the market draws families on motorbikes; Traffic moves through the Hoan Kiem district of Hanoi, Vietnam, on Wednesday, July 1, 2009

reflect something of what the city means to us, individually and collectively. And like the recent *Mapping Invisible Cities* traveling exhibition that Goethe organised at the Annexe, *Urban Soundscapes* likewise hopes to replicate that diversity of styles, visions and points-of-view that marked the photo exhibition, translated into the intangible world of music.

BLOOMBERG The significance of the KLCMF 09 to the musical life of the country cannot be underestimated – this is the first time that com-

posers from around the country and the Southeast Asian region have had a chance to meet and showcase their music at a single forum of this scale, and to engage with one another to search for common ground. While our state representatives engage in petty conflicts over stolen islands, stolen melodies and what not, it is comforting that at ground level, artists are embracing one another in search for better understanding and cooperation.

After all, in the international platform,

Southeast Asia is but a collective minority forever peering out from behind the towering shadows of established musical giants of both the West and the Far East. An international music festival will never be able to host as many new compositions from our region as the KLCMF 09 has managed to do. It is a wake-up call for local musicians to perhaps take a break from trying to make waves abroad, and perhaps start a tsunami at home. We have seen one happen in the past, and why should it stop there?

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### VOICE IN THE CROWD

The Festival, which runs from November 27 to 29 at SEGi University College Kota Damansara Campus (SKCD) and Central Market Annexe, kicks off with a concert of Malaysian composers like never before. Featuring mostly all new compositions from all over the land, this is the most ambitious Malaysian concert programme the country has ever seen.

Throughout the Festival, sixteen composers from Kedah to Kluang will present their works. At the opening concert Ahmad Muriz's *Desir Angin Cina Selatan* for gamelan and flute recalls the local art of reading the winds for news good or bad. Tan Zi Hua, winner of last year's HSBC Young Composers Workshop 08, has been specially commissioned by the Festival to present his *Under the Homotopic Silhouettes* for the standard 'Schoenberg quintet' configuration, a sonic exploration of the dark and light behind the

city's twilight outlines.

New York-based Malaysian pianist Nicholas Ong presents Adeline Wong's earlier work *Paces*, which pitches the solitary piano against the din of city life, embracing all manner of noisy suspects from child to DJ. Yü Kah Hoe retreats into the world of calligraphy with his *Wild Cursive*, featuring Malaysian zhong ruan player, Ong May Yi with string trio.

Meanwhile, yours truly pokes fun at musical convention with his *Illegal Structures III* for six instruments and tape, and at the same time asks if any of our cities' structures are legal at all, in the moral sense. Tazul Tajuddin's earlier *Torrent of Images*, first performed at a memorial concert for the victims of the Bali Bombing, makes a reprise at a timely moment to remind us that we never learn our lessons.

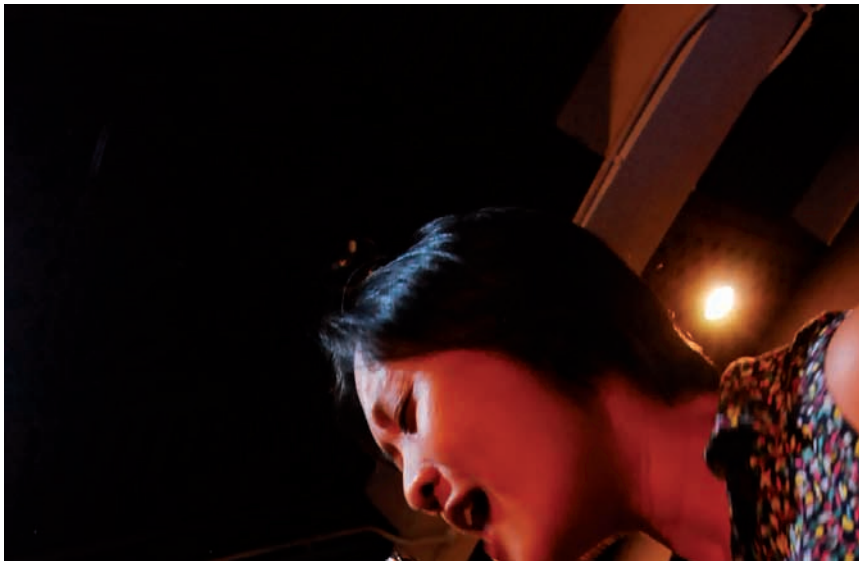
Ng Chong Lim retreats from the city into nature in his *Morning Mist* for cello and piano, because ultimately nature is the one

**Above, clockwise** A construction worker walks through the central business district in Bangkok, Thailand, June 10, 2009; Ng Chor Guan; Yong Yandsen; Berliners sing and dance on top of the Berlin Wall in front of the Brandenburg Gate to celebrate the opening of East-West German borders, in East Berlin, East Germany, November 10, 1989

who keeps us alive as the city devours. The Festival also presents a little-known secret from Penang, a quiet young composer who has lurked in the shadows: Ngiao Tzu-En's *A Precipitation of Sparrows* for flute and piano, explores Islamic tile art with stunning musical imagination.

Hardesh Singh pays tribute to his newborn nephew with *Jasper Singh Pestonji* for bass clarinet, cello and tape, with a clear message that new life is what the country needs to save it from going the way of the di-

BLOOMBERG



Above Kok Siew Wai; Tham Kar Mun



nosaur. The concert closes with a reminder from Chong Kee Yong that progress comes at a cost. Written for Het Collectief, *Mourning The Murder of an Old Banyan Tree* makes its first appearance on homeground.

The concert is presented by one of Germany's leading contemporary music groups Ensemble Mosaik, who will also present the three-day young composers workshops and the competition finals concert on November 29.

#### IT'S UNHEARD OF!

The second day the Festival celebrates music of the region with two concerts. In the 'Songs of the South Seas' evening concert at SKCD, the Hong Kong New Music Ensemble presents works by Slamet Sjukur and Tony Prabowo from Indonesia, Narong Prangcharoen from Thailand along with two new works from our own shores – Teh Tze Siew's *The East* and Chong Kee Yong's *Yuan-Fei*.

It will also be a rare treat to hear works from two veteran composers whose works one would otherwise only encounter on paper: Grawemeyer award-winning Cambodian American composer Chinary Ung's *Spiral VI*, and *Scherzo Vivo* by Paris-based veteran Vietnamese composer Nguyen Thien Dao.

It is no ordinary concert – German composer, Moritz Eggert, who was once a finalist at a composer's forum hosted in KL, presents his incorrigible *One Man Band* pieces 1 & 2 for piano and with the assistance of a mouth organ, a toy piano, as well as a foot pedal with wood block attached. The concert ends with everyone in the audience joining in for a communal evening of music-making in Filipino composer Jonas Baes' *Patangis-Buwaya*, with bird whistles, it seems, complimentary from the composer.

The Saturday Night Fever continues at the Annexe with a late night alternative concert 'Remixed: City After Dark' featuring a mix of electro-acoustic compositions. KL's musical terrorists the EMACM, comprising Yong Yandsen and Tham Kar Mun as rebels on reeds and Kok Siew Wai's wacky vocals, will realise laptop artist Ng Chor Guan's *Polygon*. Jerome Kugan also presents two of his works alongside poems and illustrations, while celebrated local electromeister Goh Lee Kwang

presents *God of Small Things* with the help of musicians Wong Eng Leong, Wong Min Lik, Lim Keh Soon and Tey Beng Tze.

Hong Kong electroacoustic wunderkind Samson Young also hits town with a brand new work, *Ageha.Tokyo* for violin and electronics with a little help from Google's quirky translation machine. Coming up from across the causeway, Hoh Chung Shih premieres his *Frisson* for viola and live electronics, and the Thais attack from the north with *Fire* by Jiradej Setabundhu and *La 3 Rua Reversed* by Boonrut Sirirattanapan, with the three-pronged night ambush completed by Otto Sidharta from Indonesia.

Surprises abound with a work for solo maracas, and Setabundhu's intriguing *Dancing Queen* (yes, it's an Abba revival) for tape and video projection wrapping up the party. Ditch the monkey suit – blue suede shoes will definitely be more comfortable.

#### THE YOUNG AND RESTLESS

When the idea of our first Young Composers Competition '08 was first mooted there was widespread scepticism. Why, just half a decade ago people were saying there were no composers in Malaysia, what more young composers? Well, the sceptics were silenced when more than fifteen young and enthusiastic composers turned up for the workshop and made the final concert something of a landmark in new music in our country.

This time around, the net has been cast out to the region. It had never been done before, and again some doubted the feasibility. As the competition's closing date drew close it seemed the naysayers were right, but then again we have always been a region of procrastinators and latecomers. Come closing day, score after score popped up in the mailbox. The competition eventually received over sixty entries from all over Southeast Asia, and the jury had an unenviable task of saying sorry to a whole lot of promising individuals, as there was room for only nine finalists.

Happily the three-day morning workshops will go some way to address this by reading through some of the works that failed to make the finals, so that the composers can get some feedback and that once-in-a-lifetime chance to hear their fledgling work being performed

by world-class musicians.

The final day of the Festival sees the showdown for the Malaysian award amongst Chow Jun Yan, Chow Jun Yi, Neo Nai Wen and Lee Chie Tsang. The regional title will be a toss-up between the winner of the Malaysian round and Juro Kim Feliz, Kittiphan Janbuala, Thatchatham Silsupan, Tan Tuan Hao and Zurazak Ut-Sa.

Members of the jury also get a chance to show their mettle as Johan Othman offers a new piano work, *Neutral Space*, a Zen exploration of the city's inner soul. Feisty Thai composer Anothai Nitibhon pleads for *Mut(e)ual Dialogue* for her city gridlocked in political fisticuffs, alongside two remarkable works from the invited German composers.

Moritz Eggert's sensational *Interior at Petworth* questions the very meaning of art, while veteran composer and Indonesian music specialist Dieter Mack's *Trio IV* shows how Asian sensibilities can form the basis of a Western composition without sounding like rojak. They will all set the bar uncompromisingly high for the young composers, but there is every indication that they are prepared for the challenge.

In the end, it's not about winning, but the experience. Anyone remotely interested in music is encouraged to come and soak up the atmosphere of classical music that is alive and in the making, to hear not just the music but also the exchange of ideas at the Asian Composers Conference. After all, music is not just about listening to your favourite Beethoven. It's also about a discovery of who were are. ■

The KLCMF 09 (November 27 to 29) is organised by Goethe-Institut Malaysia and the Malaysian Composers Collective, together with event co-organiser SEGi College Subang Jaya, and supported by *Off The Edge*. The festival brings together the best of Malaysian and Southeast Asian contemporary music at nightly concerts by Ensemble Mosaik and Hong Kong New Music Ensemble. The weekend programme of evening concerts will be held at SEGi College University Kota Damansara Auditorium A, with a special 'Remixed: City After Dark' electroacoustic concert at the Central Market Annexe. The Festival also includes the Asian Composers' Conference with talks by invited regional composers, as well as the region's first Young Composers Competition for Southeast Asian composers. More information is available at [www.malaysiancomposers.com/klcmf09](http://www.malaysiancomposers.com/klcmf09)

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