

BEING PART OF AN *Asian Fraternity*

Text and photos by Dr Jipson Quah, Editorial Board member

The Asian Doctors' Orchestra (ADO) was formed in 2017 as the Asian arm of the World Doctors' Orchestra (WDO) which comprises doctor-musicians from more than 40 countries. The WDO was set up as an independent non-profit association and is made up of more than 1,500 participants from all over the world. As a requirement, all participants must be medical doctors with outstanding musical avocations.

The inaugural ADO concert was held in Yokohama, Japan and sought to raise funds for the Children's Cancer Association. Performing works such as Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E minor*, Dvorak's *New World Symphony* and Toyama's *Rhapsody for Orchestra*, it was a resounding success commercially and further consolidated the unique orchestra of Asian doctors. Following Yokohama 2017, the next edition was set to be in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, 2019.

A unique international ensemble

As many of my fellow colleagues may know, I am a keen musician – primarily a pianist but also a classically-trained percussionist. I was thus delighted to receive an invite from Dr Evelyn Kuong, a paediatric orthopaedic surgeon from Hong Kong and a talented flautist with the WDO, to join the ADO in December 2019. As part of my application, I submitted my music qualifications online and awaited their response. I reckon that this was similar to submitting a research paper for an overseas conference! There was also a small entry fee, like a conference fee.

Maybe our junior colleagues/doctors in training can try to claim this fee in the future and see if the Ministry of Health allows reimbursement!

From my experience in organising concerts, it is certainly no mean feat to put together a concert for close to 100 musicians – especially when most are strangers based thousands of miles apart who will start living and breathing music together just three days before the actual concert! Not to mention, most of them are amateurs with hectic medical careers. I can imagine everyone trying their best to clear their caseloads before their five-day leave for the concert – the majority of which would be spent in the packed orchestra rehearsal room.

The organising committee was formed by the Formosa Cancer Foundation, Taiwan (FCF). A non-profit organisation, FCF works to reduce cancer incidence and mortality through public education, promotion of healthy lifestyles and screening activities as well as improving quality of care for cancer patients. The bulk of the musicians at this ADO edition are from the Physicians' Chamber Orchestra of Taiwan, which was founded by a group of talented and dedicated physicians and healthcare professionals in 1990. Now led by conductor Dr Kao Ching-Hong, they have grown into an ensemble of national acclaim, frequently collaborating with renowned professional conductors and soloists.

I shall admit, I was very jealous that there were such outstanding amateur

doctor-musician groups in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and South Korea. What about Singapore? From my knowledge, there is no shortage of talent in our medical fraternity. I was a member of the Singapore National Youth Orchestra and many of us grew up playing together, eventually becoming medical colleagues. Many surgeons and physicians also had long co-curricular stints in their school bands and ensembles. In fact, many still participate actively in performances, and even write and record their own music! Names that come to mind include Drs Kenneth Lyen, Ling Ai Ee, Sydney Tan, Chang Tou Liang and Au Kah Kay – all active proponents of the local music and arts scene.

Getting in "shape"

Life went on as per normal with clinical duties until two weeks before the concert, upon which I started to panic. I was to leave in a week's time and I had yet to get started on any preparation at all. What was I even playing? Ah yes, we were to play the following works:

- Lee Che-Yi: *The Temple Square*
- Beethoven: *Triple Concerto for Violin, Cello, Piano and Orchestra Op. 56*
- Tchaikovsky: *Symphony No. 5*

My fellow section member was Dr Makoto Hirakata, a distinguished palliative physician and deputy director of Aiwa Hospital in Nagano and also an outstanding timpanist/percussionist. He had played in the ADO concert in Japan



and performs in professional groups four to five times a year. We communicated briefly over email, and divided our scores and parts equally. I was to take on the cymbals, snare drum, triangle, glockenspiel and tambourine – basically anything that makes a sound – while Dr Hirkata took the mighty timpani parts, most notably in Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No. 5*. I played the same part many years ago with my high school orchestra and it is a most beautiful and exciting timpani score, all-action and powerful – basically a timpanist's dream. We agreed for Dr Hirkata to take on this role however, as he had already performed it a whopping five times previously and had more than ample experience. Dr Cheng Han-Chih, a flautist-ophthalmologist, supported our section admirably by volunteering to play the bass drum.

As part of my own preparation, I bought new mallets, percussion sticks, music files and quickly got to work. I spent hours listening to the music, rehearsing with recordings and working out tricky passages. The best thing about being a percussionist/pianist is that you don't usually have to bring your own instruments – much too cumbersome – but that also means that you have to work with whatever instruments provided. Fortunately, the FCF was able to loan very good instruments for Dr Hirkata and me.

Days of musical camaraderie

The concert was to be held at the National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts, the largest indoor performing arts centre in the world, housing a magnificent concert hall, theatre, recital hall and opera house. The concert hall, which we were performing at, houses the largest organ in Asia and has a capacity of 2,000. And surprise, surprise, the concert was sold out!

Our guest conductor was Maestro Yang Chih-Chin, Conductor-in-Residence of the Kaohsiung City Symphony Orchestra. For Beethoven's *Triple Concerto*, our soloists were Hsu Wen-Miao (paediatrician/concert violinist), Ko Ching-Tzy and Lin Sheng-Ying (professors of cello and piano at the Tainan National University of the Arts). What remained ahead were three days of intensive rehearsals from 9.30 am to 6 pm daily.

The rehearsals moved at breakneck speed as Maestro Yang sought to unify everyone's playing to align with both the composers' and his vision. Our opening item, *The Temple Square*, was a delightful native Taiwanese composition depicting a bustling market square. The thing is, no one outside of Taiwan has likely ever heard of it. Thanks to YouTube, I was able to depend on an obscure recording by a secondary school ensemble for reference. As the only Singaporean representative, I was determined not to embarrass the Singapore medical fraternity and practised doggedly. The YouTube video had about 20 views when I first found it and I had single-handedly increased it to more than 200 views by the time of the concert.

The works by Beethoven and Tchaikovsky need no introduction and it took every ounce of energy and focus from the 100-strong orchestra to bring them to life. Though rehearsals were draining, they were also immensely fulfilling. Mealtimes were my favourite as we could finally interact with our fellow musician-doctors. The concertmaster, Dr Kim Chang, is a renowned dentist-violinist. I also met Dr Haeryoung from South Korea, a violist and gastrointestinal histopathologist, and Dr Manubu Fukumoto, a violinist-gastroenterologist and the leader of the Doctors' Orchestra of Japan. Additionally, I learnt that doctors spared no expense when it came to purchasing the finest instruments; no Stradivarii in the orchestra but still very, very expensive string and wind instruments.

Finally, it was the day of the concert, and all the long rehearsals paid off handsomely. A hundred doctors from across Asia delivered a night to remember as one heart, one mind and one voice. The heroicism of Tchaikovsky, exuberance of Lee and genius of Beethoven came to the fore as we conquered the challenging concert programme under the leadership of Maestro Yang, buoyed by the knowledge that through our efforts, we managed to raise a handsome sum for the FCF.

My description fails to do the music justice and it has to be heard, so please feel free to visit the YouTube recording links at the end of the article and leave a like if you please.



Dr Quah is a GP and pathology clinical officer in private practice. He is also a member of the SMA Telemedicine Workgroup. He enjoys music-making, fitness activities and editorial work in his spare time.

To the next golden opportunity

For all of us, the majestic music themes were still resounding endlessly in our ears and minds as we packed our instruments and bags and departed the lovely country of Taiwan, back to our respective hospitals, clinics and laboratories. We looked forward to uniting once again through music. When and where next for the ADO? South Korea, Macau, or maybe even Singapore? Excited whimsical discussions on orchestral music, concert venues and charitable causes followed.

Two weeks later, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission in China reported the first cluster of cases of pneumonia. ♦

Legend

1. Tutti shot of the ADO
2. The noisiest and heaviest section, percussion! Drs Hirkata, Han and I come together for The Temple Square

Local doctor-musicians interested in joining the ADO can fill up this online form (<https://bit.ly/3glXKL7>) to register your interest!

Access the links below to watch or listen to the ADO's performance.

- 1 *The Temple Square:*
<https://bit.ly/3vfEIBU>
- 2 *Triple Concerto for Violin, Cello, Piano and Orchestra Op. 56, 1st Movement:*
<https://bit.ly/2S1jhWQ>
- 3 *Symphony No. 5, Finale:*
<https://bit.ly/3gx6gh7>
- 4 *Encore:*
<https://bit.ly/2SFbLkP>