

Christine Octaviani and Colin Tan presenting Kovacs' festive song



Review
Project Laksa
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A Whiff of the Velvety Gravy

By Dr Jipson Quah

Singapore prides herself as the hub of hubs – be it manufacturing, petrochemical, financial, biomedical and legal. We attract talent from all parts of the world – a mini United Nations, if you like. An increasingly crowded concrete jungle, Singapore is devoid of nature's best sights and sounds. But with a diverse population, we naturally enjoy an astounding range of cuisines. Food has to be one of Singapore's best attractions!

The recent showdown between *Hell's Kitchen* celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay and three celebrated Singaporean hawkers was both a cultural and culinary extravaganza. It reminded us of the world-class gastronomical wonders that exist in our tiny backyard. In addition to our local delights, we have Spanish tapas, Brazilian churrasco, Korean kimchi, Japanese sushi, French foie gras... the breakfast, lunch and dinner options are endless! Singapore's profound gastronomy is what local pianist Song Ziliang, alumni of the renowned Moscow Conservatory and Royal College of Music, sought to explore through music.

To my great surprise, this premise is not new. Western classical composers have been writing about food, an indirect form of musical sustenance, since the 17th century! Johann Sebastian Bach wrote *Coffee Cantata*, a satirical comic cantata based on his own addiction to coffee – a minimum of three cups per day. Gioachino Rossini, a gastronome phenom who gave us the *Lone Ranger* theme song *William Tell Overture*, also composed two collections of piano works revolving around anchovies, almonds and raisins. Most recently, Singapore-based Belgian conductor Robert Casteels presented *Food, Plants and Music*, an intriguing experiential performance art series.

What would then be Song's dish of choice? Laksa – a Peranakan favourite that embodies our multicultural heritage. Local composer Chen Zhangyi and librettist Jack Lin conjured a cantata about a newly engaged young gentleman who adored laksa to the extent of wanting to serve it at his wedding. Naturally, his fiancée was not keen and the dispute almost tore them apart. A tad lame, but

Photos: Siew Yi Li

still plausible in Singapore. Remember *Chicken Rice War*?

The evening began with two piano works based on traditional Chinese folk songs, *Autumn Moon on a Calm Lake* and *Celebrating Our New Life*, which were masterfully delivered by Song. The two dancelike suites by Alfred Schnittke and Darius Milhaud were well executed by Song, clarinetist Colin Tan and violinist Wu Bing Ling. They intertwined Baroque and French suite styles with a modern twist of atonality and dissonance.

In contrast, clarinetist Tan and pianist Christine Octaviani paired up for the highly entertaining *Sholem Alekhem, Rov Feidman!* by Bela Kovacs. Filled with colourful Hungarian elements, it was a boisterous gypsy dance with exuberant clarinet squeals. I would have broken into a Jewish dance – except that I know zilch about the steps!

The world premiere of the *Laksa Cantata* was eagerly anticipated. A short synopsis goes like this: Stephen, sung by baritone (and Symphony 92.4FM DJ) Kiat Goh, intends to serve his favourite laksa at his wedding, much to the dismay of Leah, played by soprano Rebecca Li. Stephen laments Leah's refusal while she anguishes at his cheap behaviour, lack of consideration and sheer stubbornness. They bicker to the point of no return before they both miraculously see the error of their ways. A husband-and-wife compromise!

I cannot recall if the compromise involved serving laksa at their wedding, but the dish was served at the concert. I am no laksa fan – once a year is perhaps more than enough for me – but Prima Taste's Laksa LaMian was stunningly good! And then I realised, the Laksa LaMian was the TRUE highlight of the concert. Librettist Lin's lyrics then reverberated in my mind: "A whiff of the velvety gravy, indulge me in this decadent leisure!"

Mind-blowing *Inception* thoughts aside, the Laksa LaMian was rated the best instant noodles internationally by a US review website (<http://www.theramenrater.com>). I found the noodles to be of the highest quality, and it was served with a heavenly laksa gravy base. The gravy was smooth, non-oily and not overly spicy. It flowed down my throat as easily as warm milk. The audience certainly agreed with me: many stayed for fourth and fifth servings! (Disclaimer: I only had three.)

(With health worries involving benzopyrene [a hydrocarbon carcinogen which affects lung, bladder, skin] found in many regular brands of instant noodles, Prima Taste's noodles appear to be a safer and delicious local alternative. I added shrimps and eggs to my maiden attempt at cooking the Laksa LaMian and it made for a magnificent savoury dinner. The only downside is perhaps the price: \$10 for a packet of four. However, if one is keen to indulge without the hassle of cooking or travelling, Prima Taste's Laksa LaMian is a first-rate option.)

This marvellous gastro-musical adventure had been simmering in the works for nearly two years before it was realised, and Song and his team have done Singaporean cuisine and music justice with their latest offering. We shall be looking forward to future yummy performances! **SMA**



Dr Jipson Quah is a keen observer of the music and arts culture in Singapore. He watches his diet fairly closely nowadays as enlistment beckons! If you have any interesting upcoming cultural events to share, email SMA News at news@sma.org.sg.



Kiat Goh and Rebecca Lim (first and second from right) and the musicians serve up a laksa storm