

Making Music

By Dr Peter Moey

ABOUT A BOY

Many years ago, a father brought his 6-year-old son to Yamaha Electone Music School. "So, do you want to learn piano or organ?"

The astute child chose the organ. "Because organ got many sounds, but piano got only one; organ got piano sound, so learn organ also can play piano."

After six years of lessons in Yamaha, the boy-turned-teenager discovered something new that fascinated him (no, *girls* came later). While studying for his PSLE, he learnt that sounds can be produced by plucking, blowing, percussion and even bowing – rubbing 2 strings together. Intrigued, he took up violin lessons, and enthralled by the sound, played about 5 to 6 hours everyday until his dad occasionally had to stop him and remind him to eat! The initial fast start, with a Grade 5 distinction after 2½ years of lessons, gave way to 'O' Levels and a subsequent sad end when his Grade 8 examination clashed with 'A' Levels. Shortly after, he was called away by the heavy thud of army boots and monotonous drone of anatomy lectures in medical school, and a possible career in the violin remains "the one that got away".

During those early years, he picked up several instruments on his own, including the cello, guitar and drums. Curiosity also led to short stints of lessons in the saxophone, Chinese flute *dizi*, *guzheng* and Indian tabla. Two years ago, he took up the harp, which he found to be "the most celestial instrument on earth", and to complete his versatility in stringed instruments. However, progress has been slow as practice time became a luxury he can no longer afford.

THE SOUND OF MUSIC

I have a wide variety of musical interests and am open to anything that is interesting: classical, jazz, rock, pop, world or even traditional music like Japanese Koto and Shakuhachi, Indian tabla and sitar ragas. Though far from having a deep



He would have made a promising orthoped...



understanding of all of them, I enjoy listening to their different sounds and tones.

If there is a composer I truly admire, it would be J S Bach. While I sometimes get tired of my favourite songs, many of Bach's works never fail to intrigue me time after time. Bach was a devout Christian and in his music, I find a little revelation of the peace, beauty and majesty in heaven. I have transcribed some of his masterpieces for a string quartet, and formed a group with like-minded musicians to play these arrangements. Someday, I hope to play them to audiences around the world, produce albums and publish the scores.

The greatest satisfaction for me is composing music, especially for a particular mood or plot. In medical school, I wrote the soundtracks for 2 plays – one for NUS KE VII Hostel and the other for my class play in the 1998 Medic Week Charity Production "Tomb With a View". Every time I finish writing a piece, I spend a lot of time fine-tuning the arrangement, and even after production has ended, I still find immense joy in listening to it over and over again.

Recognition and acceptance isn't something I set out to achieve, but have been fortunate to receive, especially when my works were played to big audiences. Such productions have given me a greater sense of achievement than being able to rattle off the different pathways of cranial nerves – these are creations that no one else in the world would have come up with in the exact same way.

MUSIC IN THE BONES

Another of my hobbies is designing and making my own instruments, which started shortly after my 'O' Levels. Back then, I only had a hand saw, drill and scrap plywood. It was only after I got an electric saw that things got interesting. Designs started getting more complicated but simpler to accomplish.

To date, I have made a 5-string electric violin and electric cello, minimalist in design with compact mode functions for easy transport. I've also created hybrids by grafting parts of

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different instruments together. It started when I chanced upon some unwanted violins and collected them; I detached the neck of one and grafted it onto a Thai *erhu* body. This instrument is played like a violin but produces an *erhu* sound! This is most appropriate for 'Butterfly Lovers Concerto', a piece written for the violin but played in the *erhu* style. Another creation is a guitar-*pipa* (guitar neck with *pipa* body), which is played like a guitar but produces a *pipa* sound.

Four years into medical school, when I stepped into an Orthopaedics operating theatre for the first time and saw drills, chisels (or 'osteotomes'), hammers and assorted screws and nails, I thought I had found my calling! However, a few months into my housemanship in Orthopaedics, I saw my Medical Officer at 4.55pm one evening and asked him where he had been the whole day. "Oh, I was on call since 7.30am yesterday and I just came out of OT. Shall we do an exit round now?" I promptly exited from my Orthopaedics career.



Dr Peter Moey with his self-made instrument – 5-string electric violin.

MUSIC ON THE MOVE

Most of my overseas trips are spent collecting interesting musical instruments. There are many musical instruments in Asia with Chinese origins but native variations which I find most exotic. In Thailand, I bought a variant of the Chinese hammered dulcimer *yangqin* (called 'kim' in Thai) which has a strangely temple-sounding timbre and longer sustain. There is also a Thai *erhu* (2-string bowed fiddle), or 'saw duang', which has nylon instead of metal strings and so has a less sad and sobbing quality to its sound. This Thai variation has rosin melted onto the top of its body so that the bow will 'self-apply' rosin while the instrument is being played. In addition, I have a mini *guzheng* from Korea, or 'kayagum', which also uses nylon strings and has a mellower sound and short sustain, as well as another two

(normal and mini) *guzhengs* from Vietnam called 'dan trans', which sound brighter than the 'kayagum' but thinner than the Chinese *guzheng*.

Perhaps, one of the most ingenious instruments I have is the 'dan bau' from Vietnam. It is 1-stringed but can play the whole range of notes on scales! The harmonics of the string are used to get fixed notes of the scale, and a lever at one end of the string is for adjusting the tension of the string to get the notes in between. I used to think the 'dan bau' was exclusive to Vietnam, but I've seen 12 Girls Band (the Chinese version of Bond that plays Chinese traditional instruments) use it. Other instruments in my collection (some contributed by friends) include thumb pianos from South Africa ('kalimba') and Indonesia, Nepalese fiddle and drum, Indian tabla, and Vietnamese 'san xian'.

In Vietnam, I also found instrument makers open to new concepts and custom designs. They helped me construct my 5-stringed classical violin and 7-stringed classical guitar. A 12-stringed classical violin and 5-stringed cello are on the way. These allow greater versatility during improvisations for pop songs and are great for classical transcriptions. I intend to go to Philippines someday; some Filipino nurses tell me Cebu makes the world's best guitars using wood from the jackfruit tree (my goodness, will ants come and eat my guitar?). I hope to start a new range of unusual musical instruments in the future with complementary music compositions, arrangements and transcriptions for the instruments.

MEDICINE AND MUSIC

With a mini home studio, I hope eventually to produce soundtracks for movies and plays, advertisement jingles, song demos for music companies, song arrangements for



Another self-made instrument – electric cello.

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Made in Vietnam: 5-string violin and 7-string classical guitar.

commercial albums, and my own CD recordings (Christian contemporary songs, original classical compositions and arrangements, East-meets-West hybrid music, and so on). I also hope to carve out a name for myself in the performance scene and go on world tours with singers. Meanwhile, I have started writing a book on “Pop Piano

for Classical Pianists” to share my insight on how a person trapped in the classical training of scales, arpeggios and fingering can improvise with a pop style. With a little luck, I might be able to start a pop music school... then franchise it... then expand to Southeast Asia... then the world... then... Then again, with all these aspirations, I need a complementary medical career to back me up! Someday, I would like a flexible working lifestyle (like full-time locum) to juggle work and music.

Dreams aside, I have joined the Masters of Medicine (Family Medicine) training programme in the event that I meet ‘the right one’ and need a ‘proper job’ to raise a family. ■



Although Dr Peter Moey (MBBS, 2001)(S) is mostly known to friends simply as “the guy who played the violin and piano at a friend’s wedding”, he is anything but. The enthusiastic music lover has performed with various bands and orchestras. His cello has taken him from his JC’s (Junior College) Harmonica Band to a string octet for Sky Wu’s concert in Suntec City. He also played the violin and keyboard with the String Ensemble and String Orchestra in Secondary School and JC, NUS KE VII Hostel Band, and the Ocean Butterfly singers, including a gig with Kit Chan. On two occasions, he performed at the Esplanade Concert Hall, one of which featured Jeff Chang as a guest artiste. The other was a show where his band played 3 songs, including a cover of ‘Runaway’ by The Corrs, where he showcased his self-made 5-string electric violin to a full house. With a local ensemble called The Chamber Players, he also performed in a couple of classical concerts at University Cultural Centre and Esplanade Recital Studio. To contact Dr Moey, visit his website at www.petermoey.com.