

Dr Sydney Tan has been involved professionally in music for the last 24 years as a Music Director, Arranger and Producer and his artiste roster includes luminaries such as Dick Lee, Jacky Cheung, Jacintha, Zoe Tay, Clement Chow, Gurmit Singh, Tracy Huang, Kit Chan, and Taufik Batisah. His more recent projects include being the Music Director for the "Made in Singapore" series of concerts at the Esplanade and recording the winning song for the inaugural *Singapore Idol* series for Taufik and Sylvester Sim, arranging and producing the National Day song "Home" by Kit Chan, as well as the theme song for Hong Kong superstar Jacky Cheung's Snow Wolf Lake album.

Feeling the Rhythmic Pulse



Dr Sydney Tan with Kit Chan at the scene of the musical "Forbidden City".

You have worked with some of the best musicians in the region including Jacky Cheung and Kit Chan. Can you tell us some of your more memorable moments and partnerships in the music industry?

Hmmm. They say you never forget your first times, so not in any particular order of merit:

- a) As a young producer in 1986, being thrown in the deep end by Warner boss Jimmy Wee to produce

“Stand up for Singapore” (Singapore’s version of a “We are the world” project then), facing 20 to 30 industry heavy weights (and egos) simultaneously in the same room in EMI studios and having to tell each person what, how and when to sing without offending anyone! That was 20 years ago and many of them are my patients and friends today so I suppose I did not do too badly, I guess.

- b) National Day Parade 2002. Having convinced the organising committee to try a different approach to the National Anthem, we had Jacinta sing an orchestral version with jazz harmonies, (*ala* David Foster with the American national anthem some years back). Watching the entire stadium hushed and reading the reactions of people in *The Straits Times* the next day was very gratifying as I am a hardcore Patriot!
- c) Being the musical director for “Forbidden City” (especially at the landmark official opening of the Esplanade in 2002) and conducting every night at the Esplanade during this period. It is a beautifully put together musical with very, very high production values. The primary creative team (director, script, choreographer, lights and sound) consists of West Enders at the top of their game. The music team is Singaporean (composer Dick Lee, arranger Bang Wen Fu and myself) so it was all quite high pressure and challenging but when we come out with a high quality product that is well received and wins the respect and trust of the whole creative team and cast, it is satisfying and helps build one’s belief and confidence.
- d) I have been working closely with Dick Lee for the last 25 years so that has been a long term and fruitful musical partnership. Dick is very big picture but does not get into the execution and detail a whole lot so it is pretty synergistic that way and there is a lot of mutual respect.

How did you get involved in *Singapore Dreaming*?
Dr Woffles Wu.

Do you have a favourite character or scene from *Singapore Dreaming*?

I liked the “Irene” character most. The Pa and Seng characters are scoundrels, Mei is too tough and I did not like the way she (the character) does not respect the men in her life whereas Irene was committed to Seng in spite of all he did to her and demonstrated a lot of kindness to Ma and was very respectful to Pa. My traditional values are peeking through, I guess.

How does a musical director decide to score a film?
I cannot answer this question as *Singapore Dreaming* was my first movie (I am due to start work though,

on another film score for a Hong Kong director and Singapore film maker, later this year) but (as in housemanship) I was thrown in the deep end and learnt on the job, constantly reading to come to grips with this new world (of film).

I have had a lot of experience in music with live orchestras, choirs, bands, acapella groups/ethnic instrumentation and especially in the world of recordings and album production but film was an entirely new animal. But it is in my nature to just jump in and I love breaking something down to figure out how it works. The bottom line is most of the music things were intuitive, you kind of just feel what is right (God given abilities). Reading the manuals or John Williams books and so on gives you handles and names for what you have been doing intuitively but you now have a vocabulary to interface with industry veterans. An analogy would be like in jazz piano and the world of re-harmonisation – you have heard the sounds in your head or on albums for a long time and have used them in writing and performance but reading and studying gives you the names (for example, Ab/F#7 = F#13+11). A bit *lay chey* but language and vocabulary are important if you want to interface with the world. (Oh, I just realised I did not answer your question! Minus five marks.)

Why is it that many Singapore-made films with dialect songs always defer to Hokkien songs, like “Bong Chun Hong” (Pining for the Spring Breeze)? What about Cantonese, Teochew or Hakka songs?

I am Peranakan, Baba, and an ACS boy to boot so it is all “Chinese” to me. I do not think the “dialect” factor is ever the basis of the choice. Being musicians/artistes, we are listening to the emotional soul of the melody and that is the “language” we connect with. Thus when Dick Lee chooses old Chinese melodies to rework, our attention is first drawn to the beauty of the emotion and the dialect does not even enter the picture. It is like meeting a person for the first time and going “What a delightful or funny person and so on”. Dialect or race does not come in the picture. I suppose it is we, as doctors, who have been trained to look out for dialect or race-specific disease associations!

What are some of your favourite film scores in the history of cinema?

Pre-2005, it used to be “Oh what a lovely piece of music” (that is, appreciation of the musical or emotional content) but now there is a new developing cognitive awareness of the process or mechanics and it is becoming “Wow, so clever. How did he achieve that effect?”. The *Cinema Paradiso* and *Deer Hunter* themes are moving, John Williams’ *Star Wars* score is incredibly epic and the themes from *Jaws* and *Psycho* demonstrate clever musical device to generate emotional response.

Singapore gets music influences from both the East and West. Can there ever be definitive Singapore music? Here we go again with the “Singapore identity”. My belief is that ‘in vitro’ controlled or forced experiments will always result in strange mutations like the “orchid dress” where as ‘in vivo’ (real life), evolutions and natural expressions give birth to unconscious, lovely, natural and wonderful things like Singlish! (Some may beg to disagree.) The best things we create are always spontaneous and not planned. Our influences, that is sounds, melodies, instruments, language, experience and so on, go into the mix and what comes out will be unique to a person of such an age growing up in this place in Asia, with these friends and these experiences. The thing to avoid is being contrived or to try to manufacture something. Culture just is. We describe and define it after the fact, and cannot manufacture it.

We hear you are juggling a busy general practice with being a music conductor for “Forbidden City – Portrait of an Empress”. How do you manage to juggle the two demanding jobs?

Er, it is more than two. I am working on “Dancefloor” for MediaCorp, another project for Japan, Dick’s new album and the Christmas and New Year specials with the Singapore Idols. To answer the question: sleep less, do not watch TV (except for Manchester United on the weekends) and choose projects carefully. Oh and have an understanding wife!

Can you tell us how you developed your passion for music that has led you to being one of its most accomplished practitioners?

I played piano since I was 6-year-old (credit to mum), had six years surrounded by brass, wind and string instruments in school bands (credit to the late Mr Lim Peng Ann – teacher/conductor/mentor), spent a lot of time with choirs (in churches) and have been given a lot of encouragement and opportunities through the years (credit to Louis Soliano, Pat Chan, Dick Lee, Jimmy Wee amongst others), and have immense curiosity, a deep emotional well, a perfectionist streak and some degree of talent (credit to the Grace and Purposes of God. Paraphrased quote: “So how can we glory in that which is given to you?”).

Did you ever contemplate being a professional musician? Professional as in standards (qualitative) or in being paid for what I do? I am already that on both counts. Seriously, many times I meet colleagues who pass the word or joke about medicine being “part-time” which cannot be further from the truth. Picking up a cancer early, counselling a patient through depression, relieving acute pain with an injection are on a different scale in terms of “real-life stuff”, compared to the world of the arts. Having said that,

compared to the convergent processes of Medicine, the divergent world of Music serves as a wonderful balance and provides for rich emotional experiences and meeting lots of colourful people. Sometimes the twain do meet and just two days ago, “Prince Tun” hurt himself on the first show of “Forbidden City” and required an injection to make it through with the second show. So yes, I am a professional musician AND a professional doctor as well with equal weightage and importance to both.

Were you already active in the local music scene while in medical school?

Yes. I was the musical director for “Jesus Christ Superstar” and “I remember Broadway” (with Pat Chan and the Times group). Those living in KE Hall in the early 1980s would see members of “STARDUST”, “Dissonant Affair” (Talentime winners) and “Onesimus Principle” wandering the corridors at all hours as they came for rehearsals with me. Incidentally in the third year of medical school, I was the musical director for Dick Lee’s Life in the Lion City album tours and I put together a band (nicknamed the “All Star variety band” by Dick) consisting of amongst others, producer Shah Tahir on guitar and Ken Lim (*Singapore Idol* judge) on drums.

Are there any similarities between Medicine and Music?

Yes. Rhythm (heart/pulse/respiratory rates) and sound (heart sounds/auditory tests) would be obvious examples. I am interested and have bought a few books on music and the mind, exploring issues of music therapy and how certain melodies or rhythms are able to evoke certain biological responses. I would like to explore that more at some time in the future.

Do you pipe music into the waiting area of your clinic?

No. I pretty much keep my world of music separate and most of my patients do not really know of my “other life” other than when they bump into “this or that person” in the waiting room.

If you were stranded on Pulau Ubin, which DVD and CD would you bring?

If this is a literal question, I would get bored if I listened to something too many times. If it is a question about things I like to listen to or watch, it depends on moods but the different influences in my musical life are not so much artistes but the music producers. So I have been heavily influenced by the work of Quincy Jones, David Foster, Sergio Mendes (check out his new work with Black Eyed Peas!) and Trevor Horn amongst others. A lot of new music is rhythmic with not much melodic or harmonic content but when they get it right and merge the best of both worlds like in Madonna’s *Musique* album and the *Moulin Rouge* movie, it is pretty great! ■