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CHAPTER 4

Chinese Choral Activities

Chia Wei Khuan



Choral singing, a tradition beginning with Christianity in Western Europe, has evolved into an art form that is adored by people universally. According to the *New Harvard Dictionary of Music* choral singing means ‘a group of singers who perform together, either in unison or in parts’ (Randel 1986: 162). Today, choral activities are popular and flourishing in many parts of Singapore, including schools, churches and communities. There are at least a few hundred choral groups here, many of which rehearse and perform regularly. This chapter specifically examines the Chinese community and their choral activities in Singapore.

Thus far, Chinese choral activities in Singapore have not been extensively researched. Therefore, this chapter is based on this writer’s personal involvement in the choral scene since 1970, as well as newspaper reports, concert programmes, bulletins and unpublished notes from various choirs, and interviews of key members of Chinese choirs and the choral movement (Chae; Lee; Poh 2011).

Choral Activities: The Early Years

Choral singing found its way here through the arrival of the Europeans, who brought along their religious and musical traditions after Singapore was founded by the British in 1819. Though little documentation survives on choral singing prior to the 1900s, this activity might have started with the singing of hymns in the churches in the 19th century. Other than church activity, choral singing also took place in the European and Eurasian communities and gradually spread to other English-speaking, as well as the non-English-speaking, immigrants through the setting up of mission schools at the turn of 20th century.

What we today call choral singing was popular among the Chinese immigrants and occupied a unique place among the Chinese communities in Singapore. The activity prevailed in two distinct settings in accordance with the social-cultural context, environment and audience. The first was linked to the Chinese churches, while the second evolved in the general Chinese communities. The former had to do with the growing number of Chinese church attendees in Singapore. This led to the founding of Chinese churches and increasing demands for Chinese-missionaries to translate the hymns for non-English-speaking churchgoers. This form of music tradition is much alive today in Chinese churches. Many church choirs were formed and attained various levels of singing standards, but the role of choral singing was primarily to fulfil functions and events in the church. Nevertheless, some community choirs, such as the Herald’s Choral Society, were able to fulfil dual music needs – the sacred and the secular – rather well because the conductors were active in church work. Therefore, the line between a church and community choir could be a little vague sometimes.

The latter choral setting closely resembled the genre developed in China, which included using choral activities to boost financial support to alleviate the political turmoil in their homeland. This trend, which persisted in promoting choral singing from the 1930s through into the 2010s, has been the most significant event in choral music history in Singapore. Generally, this span of slightly more than 70 years can be divided into four phases, that is, before and after the Second World War, since independence and the formation of the Choral Association.

The First Phase: Before the Second World War

The beginning of this phase has its origin in China. Choral singing is alien to China, even though many traditional vocal art forms have existed since the ancient period. It was first introduced through Western culture in an attempt to transform China after a succession

of military and political defeats in the 19th century, beginning with the Opium Wars during the late Qing Dynasty.

After the Revolution of 1911 and the formation of the Republic of China, Western music continued to establish a firm place in the education curriculum, which provided the basis for introducing choral music. The modest singing curriculum was the *School Song* (学堂乐歌), beginning with simple unison singing and gradually adding a second and third vocal part. Following the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the mass-oriented choral activity further assumed a new role in national reconstruction and mass education. The popularity of choral music, written to strengthen morale and arouse social consciousness during the Sino-Japanese war in the 1930s, was a result of this effort and viewed as an effective medium to unite the Chinese against the Japanese invaders. Choral classics like Xian Xinghai's *Yellow River Cantata* (冼星海: 《黄河大合唱》), Huang Zi's *Fluttering Flag* (黄自: 《旗正飘飘》) and Nie'er's *March of the Volunteers* (聂耳: 《义勇军进行曲》), were not only widely performed then, but can still be heard in concert today.

Because of the close link between the Chinese communities in Singapore and mainland China, the anti-Japanese sentiment expressed through music activity was equally prevalent. This patriotism was further instigated by the visit of Wuhan Chorus (武汉合唱团) during its fund-raising concert tour in 1938, singing a full programme of patriotic repertoire. From 19 December 1938 to 5 April 1939, the Chorus gave a total of 16 performances in Singapore before embarking to perform in peninsula Malaya. As a result, music enthusiasts were inspired to form choirs to replicate the Wuhan Chorus (Ye 2006: 5). Despite lacking concrete evidence, several oral accounts indicate that the Tongluo



A quartet comprising Pong Kar Chau, Reverend Oh Lock Chee, Yong Yuk Cheun and Paul Lenn – performing a song item at the Overseas-Chinese Baptist (Cantonese Congregation) at Tras Street in the 1950s. Kay Poh Road Baptist Church collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Music Society (铜锣音乐会) founded in 1939 was the most influential, having written and performed a great amount of patriotic and military songs under the leadership of visiting Chinese musician, Ren Guang (任光). Its activities somehow did not last very long. Soon after the Second World War broke out in December 1941, Chinese choirs, together with many other anti-Japanese activities, quickly went underground or became inactive during the Japanese Occupation from 1942–1945.

The Second Phase: After the Second World War

Choral singing regained its popularity among Chinese youths in Singapore immediately after the war. The Tongluo Music Society was again active. Greatly influenced by the change of political climate in China, in particular, the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and adhering to the notion that a community music group must fulfil some form of social responsibility in addition to creating music, Tongluo redirected its anti-Japanese sentiment towards anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. To suppress this, the British colonial government resorted to either clamping down on such arts groups or denying them the right to public performances. Tongluo disbanded and did not survive beyond 1956. The incident that led to its closure was a fund-raising concert for Nanyang University in 1955, co-organised with the Rediffusion Youth Choir (丽的呼声青年歌咏队), the Industrial and Commercial Old Boys Association (工商校友会) and the Lee Howe Choral Society (李豪合唱团). Because the authorities felt that the event contained strong anti-government sentiment, and in particular took issue with the logo that appeared in the concert programme, the performance was denied and some members were either detained or interrogated (Chae; Lee; Poh 2011).¹

Despite action from the government, the number of choirs and activities still flourished in the 1950s and 1960s. Apart from Tongluo, other leading choirs then included the Lee Howe Choral Society (李豪合唱团, founded 1952), the Rediffusion Youth Choir (丽的呼声青年歌咏队, founded 1953), the Metro Philharmonic Society (星市音乐会, founded 1959) and the Herald's Choral Society (佳音合唱团, founded 1961). Other active but not so prominent choirs from that time include Industrial and Commercial Old Boys Association (工商校友会), Ai Tong Alumni (爱同校友会) and Kang Le Music Society (康乐音乐研究会). It is also worth noting that at that time opportunities for formal training were limited and musical resources were extremely scarce. Somehow, choral activities were able to thrive under the leadership of two locally-based, China-trained young musicians, Lee Howe (李豪, 1915–2009) and Samuel Ting Chu San (丁祝三, 1926–2007), and the homegrown, self-taught music talent Leong Yoon Pin (梁荣平, 1931–2011).

The Lee Howe Choral Society was founded in 1952 by Lee Howe. She was one of the very few Chinese musicians to be born and receive her early music training in China, but ended up in Singapore. During the Sino-Japanese War she took up a teaching position in Malacca and then at Nanyang Girls' High School (南洋女中) in Singapore in 1941. After the Second World War, she also taught in Chung Cheng High School (中正中学) and Chinese High School (华侨中学). Therefore, the members of the choir were mainly made up of students and alumni from the schools she had taught in. The Lee Howe Choral Society remained one of the most active and influential choirs in Singapore, performing and organising numerous concerts for many years. Since the 1980s, after China re-opened its doors to foreign countries and investment, the Society has been most pro-active in choral exchanges, either in the form of visiting China or inviting choirs from China to perform here. In 2002, after witnessing the Society celebrate its 50th anniversary and partly also due to her declining health, Lee Howe proposed that the choir be renamed Song Lovers Choral Society (乐友合唱团) in 2003. Despite the name change, it remains Singapore's oldest choir.

A year after the founding of Lee Howe Choral Society, another choir called Rediffusion Youth Choir was formed in 1953. Rediffusion Singapore is a company that originally pioneered cable radio in Singapore. It was founded in 1949 as a result of the success of radio broadcasting in the decade after the Second World War. In an attempt to generate listenership as Singapore's only subscription radio service, the Head of the Chinese broadcasting section Lee Shiao Yin (李晓音) founded the Rediffusion Youth Choir. At the onset, it was simply a mixed group of singers who rehearsed and put together a singing programme to meet the Rediffusion Singapore's weekly broadcasting need. The person leading the singing group was the 22-year-old, self-taught pianist-cum-conductor Leong Yoon Pin. The weekly programme became so popular that it began to attract other local music talents, such as Lee Yuk Chuan (李煜传) and Lui Chun Seng (吕政成). In 1955, Leong was awarded a scholarship to study at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. Following his departure and under increasing British colonial government scrutiny, the fate of the choir was sealed and it was finally disbanded after the aborted Nanyang University fund-raising concert.

In 1959, Leong Yoon Pin returned from his studies in Britain. Almost instantly, he gathered together a group of instrumentalists and founded the Metro Philharmonic Society (星市音乐会) and later a choir of more than 70 members. The members, then, were mainly peers from the diffused Rediffusion Youth Choir, plus high school students (equivalent to current 'A' level students) and young working adults. Surprisingly, many are still active today. The stalwart of this choir no doubt was Leong. Apart from two other study trips in 1966 and 1975, Leong remained the Music Director and conductor of the Metro Philharmonic Choir until his declining health prevented him from continuing sometime in 2007. Throughout the years, due to the scarcity of choral repertoire in the 1960s and 1970s, Leong composed and arranged many choral compositions specifically for the choir as well as other local choirs, making him one of the pioneering, and most eminent, composers in Singapore. In addition, he worked hard to promote other forms of music learning among its members to nurture the next generation of musicians; this, in the end, paid off quite handsomely.

The Metro Philharmonic Society, during its peak in the late 1960s and early 1970s, maintained a 20-member string orchestra and two choirs, a main choir with more experienced singers and a youth choir. Other notable conductors included Lee Yuk Chuan, Lui Chun Seng and Ng Eng Kee (黄荣基). In the 1990s, in an attempt to salvage the declining membership of the choir, an effort was made to revive the youth choir. Because of the close affiliation with Leong, the choir has premiered most of Leong's choral works.

The Herald's Choral Society was the other major choir of the same era. It was founded in 1961 by Samuel Ting Chu San, who received his early music training at Fuzhou University in China. He migrated to Singapore in 1953 and taught at Chung Cheng High School (中正中学) for two years. In 1957, he received a scholarship to study at the University of Southern California, taking piano, voice, composition and conducting simultaneously. Ting returned to Singapore in 1959 and started teaching at Trinity College (三一学院) and Ngee Ann College (义安学院). Herald's Choral Society was a significant and highly regarded music-making body in the 1960s and 1970s. This group reached out mainly to the Chinese-educated singers in the churches and community organisations and was active in many musical events. It made at least nine performance trips to Malaysia in the 1960s. In the 1970s, it toured Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia and Australia. The Society was dormant in the 1990s after Ting migrated to Australia in 1981, though he still spent time – sometimes months – in Singapore to work with the choir. During its prime, the Herald's Choral Society had three sub-choirs in addition to the main choir and an

instrumental ensemble, Echo Angklung Group. These sub-choirs were called the Echo Children's Choir, Echo Women's Choir and Herald's Youth Choir. Its current conductor is Chen Zhi Hui (陈智慧).

The Lee Howe Choral Society, Metro Philharmonic Society and Herald's Choral Society were indeed the three most significant and influential music-making bodies in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, they have served the music community to the present day. There have been several factors that have contributed to their sustainability and success. It was timely to have three highly skilled and trained musicians who were determined to improve the music scene, especially choral singing in Singapore. Not only did each form their own choral group but also devoted their entire lives to nurturing it. Both Lee Howe and Samuel Ting received their early music training in China and later furthered their studies in England and the United States respectively. Leong began directing the choir as a self-taught musician before securing the opportunity to study in England and later in Paris with the French composer and conductor Nadia Boulanger. With regard to choral style, each choir was naturally influenced and distinguished by the training and background of its conductor.

This was a period when Singapore was confronted with many internal and external social, political and economic instabilities and uncertainties. Participating in a choir, apart from being able to appreciate the subtleties of the vocal art, was highly regarded and considered a noble cause in life. The attitude of the members and musicians towards singing was serious; the mission was to fulfil certain social responsibilities, either in the form of making a political stand, or promoting choral singing as a preferred art form. In comparison to today, the recruitment of choir members was never an issue then. During their heyday in the mid 1960s, the size of the each choir could easily be a hundred members or more. As mentioned above, Herald's Choral Society once had three feeder choirs, while Metro Philharmonic Society had a youth group.

In terms of repertoire, due to the formation of the People's Republic of China, the disruption of musical exchange between Singapore and China and the avoidance of songs with political overtones, choirs here sang mainly Chinese folk and art songs re-arranged for four-part choruses, or translations of Western choral works. Some of the revolutionary songs of China were already known here, and rarely passed the censorship to be sung on stage. Because of the limited repertoire choice, many conductors were forced to arrange or compose choral works to meet the rehearsal demands. Leong Yoon Pin and Samuel Ting (also the founder and first chairperson of the Composers' Association) were among the pioneers who have contributed immensely. Their effort in turn has inspired others, such as Lee Yuk Chuan, Soh Kay Cheng (苏启祯) and Phoon Yew Tien (潘耀田), to follow suit.

Intended or unintended, through many years of hard work, Leong Yoon Pin became the most notable and productive local composer, having written numerous large- and small-scale choral works and other instrumental compositions. Also, Metro Philharmonic Society was credited for translating and staging two operas in Chinese, Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* and Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*. In 1970, it also premiered the Chinese version of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy*, the fourth movement from the Ninth Symphony, with more than 120 singers and accompanied by two pianos. It was quite phenomenal that the choirs were able to pool together their resources to meet all the musical demands.

As for vocal quality and choral sound, these choirs, often with piano accompaniment, were characterised by a robust, vibrant full-bodied sound. This preferred the choral singing style, which has its roots in Russian and Eastern European choral traditions, was similar to the one that was first introduced to and widely practised in China. One other explanation for having such a singing quality could be that many singers aspired to be soloists. Therefore, going to a singing teacher to have individual singing lessons was very

common. For example, both Lee Howe and Samuel Ting had personally coached many choir members in voice. With additional voice training, the resultant overall sonority of these choirs, up until today, is very unlike the straight and vibrato-less 'cathedral' quality which is much admired by the non-Chinese choirs. Having said this, it is still difficult to define a distinctive sound among the choirs because ultimately the sound of each group rests largely upon the individual conductor's skill, preferences and choice of repertoire, as well as the musical abilities of the singers.

The Third Phase: Since Independence

While the three choirs mentioned thus far continued to thrive, a new and invigorating choir, the National Theatre Chorus (国家剧场艺术合唱团), later renamed Melo Art Choir (艺术合唱团), burst onto the scene in May 1968. It was one of the core troupes (Chinese orchestra, symphony orchestra and dance) under the National Theatre Trust, with Lee Yuk Chuan as the conductor. Financially supported by the Ministry of Culture, for the first time choir members were given a monthly allowance as a professional fee. With such financial backing it attracted the most-talented singers and became the premier choir within a short time, enjoying immense success and audience support through many concerts, outreach programmes and recording contracts. Another advantage it had over other choirs was that it could easily stage large-scale production with help from other National Theatre troupes. During its prime, the choir, together with its Chinese orchestra, never failed to get full audience attendance at their regular concerts in the communities and the National Theatre. It was a pity that its heyday came to an abrupt end when the National Theatre Trust decided to discontinue the support scheme on 16 March 1974. According to Lee Yuk Chuan, the scheme incurred high costs and ran into financial difficulty. Altogether, the choir lasted about six years. In spite of that, members continued to rehearse and perform regularly under the same name until it was renamed Melo Art Choir in 1980.

Chinese choral singing remained exuberant throughout the 1970s. Other active choirs included People's Association Choir, Singapore Broadcasting Corporation Choir (which became the City Choir in 1986), Singapore Teachers' Choir, Xing Hai Arts Society (星海艺术研究会), National Theatre Club Choir, Le Yue Chamber Choir (乐乐合唱团) and Sing Sheng Philharmonic Chorus (新声合唱团). Together they contributed much to the development of the choral scene in Singapore. Interestingly, for each choir listed above, one could easily name a conductor whose name is closely associated with it. Corresponding to the choirs listed above, they are: Tian Min En (田鸣恩), Chiew Keng Hoon (周炯训), Goh Say Meng (吴世铭), Lee Ngo Wah (李伍华), Wang Bin (王玢), Soh Yen Ching (苏燕卿) and Cecilia Chu (朱承安).

In general, the sustenance of such activity could partly be attributed to the popularity of choral singing in the then Chinese schools. Since the 1950s, schools such as Chinese High School (华侨中学), Chung Cheng High School (中正中学), Dunman Government High School (德明政府中学), Nanyang Girls' High School (南洋女中), Whampoa High School (黄埔中学), Yock Eng High School (育英中学), River Valley High School (立化中学) and Hwa Yi Secondary School (华义中学) had been breeding grounds for new members of the Chinese choirs. The supply, however, began to dry out after the mid-1980s because of an education reform and policy change that occurred earlier in 1979, during which the Chinese stream, together with Malay and Tamil, was merged into one major stream that utilised English as the main teaching medium. The number of Chinese-educated students who could be potential members of Chinese choirs thus dwindled drastically.

The other probable cause for the declining number was that school leavers in the 1980s did not find singing in a Chinese choir appealing or an attractive option due to



A choir entertaining the guests at the global reunion of Nanyang University Alumni 1995 Nantah Night Dinner at the Technological University. MITA collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

the changing social and cultural setting in Singapore. With increasing political stability and steady economic growth, singing in a choir, though still regarded as fine arts, had nothing to do with pursuing a noble cause in life. They instead were more inclined to participate in the newly evolved musical genre, Xinyao (新谣), a Singapore-style Chinese ballad. Others whom were keen on choral singing but were not proficient in the Chinese language preferred choirs or vocal ensembles that sung Western repertoire.

The Fourth Phase: Formation of the Choral Association

The Chinese choirs in the early days were rather self-contained and self-sufficient. Rarely would they pool their effort in a joint project. The performance of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* (Chinese version) in July 1970 was an occasion where the Metro Philharmonic Society managed to put together more than 120 singers on the same stage, but these members from other choirs were invited on a personal basis rather than through any organised collaboration. On 23 August 1980, during a forum on Singapore Chinese Choral Activities, led by Lee Howe, the idea of organising joint annual concerts was mooted. Representatives from 11 choirs at the forum greeted it with great enthusiasm and it thus gave birth to an organising committee named Eleven Choirs. Besides Lee Howe Choral Society, the other founding members were Metro Philharmonic Society, Herald's Choral Society, Melo Art Choir, Young Voices (青声合唱团), Vigilante Corps Choir (人民警卫队合唱团), Singapore Armed Forces Reservists Association Choir (新加坡后备军协合唱团), Singapore Broadcasting Corporation Choir, National Theatre Club Choir, Le Yue Chamber Choir and Sing Sheng Philharmonic Chorus. Supported by the then National Theatre Trust, this marked the first time a national body was founded to coordinate choral

activities and other music interests that were pertinent to Chinese choirs. From the onset, the Eleven Choirs' main tasks were organising annual joint concerts, creating a platform for choir interaction and promoting the vocal arts.

In 1995 the annual joint concert was formally expanded into the First Choral Festival for Chinese Choirs, with Melo Art Choir as the first organiser. It was agreed that each member would take turns to organise this annual event. By 1996, considering the memberships had exceeded the original founding choirs and stood at 15, it was decided that the new name of Choral Association (Singapore) be adopted. From 1997 onwards, the choral festival continued to grow and became a biennial grand choral exchange event that showcased choirs from Singapore and the region: i.e., Southeast Asia, China and Taiwan. In 2006, the Association decided to switch to a new festival format and added the competition segment. The event was thus renamed the Singapore International Chinese Choral Festival. The inaugural festival attracted 31 choirs (17 local and 14 foreign), of which 20 participated in the competition. The success of the first international choral festival encouraged the Association to organise the Second Singapore International Chinese Choral Festival in 2009. This festival took three years to materialise, partly due to the unfavourable economic climate. Nevertheless, a total of 29 choirs participated (19 local and 10 foreign), with 14 selected to compete. After two successful runs, the Association held its third festival in 2011, with a total of 15 local and 14 foreign choirs. It seems the international choral festival will remain a major regular music feature in Singapore for some time.

To remain proactive and committed to promoting choral and other musical activities in Singapore, the Association continued to stage large-scale choral concerts at the Esplanade Concert Hall to alternate with the international choral festivals. Other events it organised include the annual choral sharing among local and Malaysian choirs, a young singers' concert and the Singapore-Malaysia Vocal Competition. In 2010, the Association made a bold attempt by initiating the First Singapore International Vocal Competition, which attracted 140 singers from China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Russia, Taiwan, the United States and Singapore.

With the formation of the Choral Association, Chinese choral movements seemed to be enjoying a renaissance, despite the fact that a shortage of young Chinese-speaking members continued to be an issue. On the other hand, choirs had learned to accept the reality of an ageing membership in the changing social environment. This adverse situation actually started as early as the late 1980s and became more acute in the 1990s. Amazingly, most choirs remained active and continue to hold yearly concerts. More significantly, the total number of choirs, to date, has increased rather than decreased. The most recent Choral Association registry lists 25 members, although the number of Chinese choirs could be more, since several choirs have yet to register with the Association.

Choral Association (Singapore) – 2012

Alumni of Chung Cheng High School (中正校友合唱团)

Ann Kway Association (安溪会馆合唱协会)

Art Star Arts Society (艺星合唱团)

Centre of Activity and Recreation for the Elders Choir (颐年中心合唱团)

Chayang (Dapu) Clan Association Male Chorus (茶阳[大埔]会馆男声合唱团)

Chinese Star Music Society (华星音乐协会合唱团)

City Choir (城市合唱团)

Comfort Choir (康福合唱团)

Echo Philharmonic Society (雅歌爱乐协会)

Hokkien Huay Kuan's Choir (福建会馆合唱团)

- 01 Melo Art Choir (艺术合唱团)
- 02 Meterfield Music Choir (韵野合唱团)
- 03 Metro Philharmonic Society (星市音乐会合唱团)
- 04 Nanchiao Alumni Choir (南侨校友会室内合唱团)
- 05 Nantah Alumni Choir (南大校友合唱团)
- 06 Nanyang Girls' Alumni Choir (南洋中小幼校友会合唱团)
- 07 Nanyang Khok Community Guild Chorus (南洋客属总会合唱团)
- 08 National Theatre Club Choir (国家剧场俱乐部合唱团)
- 09 Shi Yan Choir (实验合唱团)
- 10 Song Lovers Choral Society (乐友合唱团)
- 11 Southern Arts Society (南方艺术研究会)
- 12 Straits Music and Arts Society (海峡音乐艺术协会)
- 13 Tanjong Pagar Community Club Senior Citizen Choir (丹戎巴葛民众俱乐部合唱团)
- 14 Yuying School Alumni Choir (育英校友会合唱团)
- 15 Zhonghua Alumni Choir (中华校友会合唱团)

What brought about the revival of Chinese choral movements, especially in recent decades? Here are some possible explanations. Today's leading members are mainly Chinese-educated students from the 1960s and 1970s, many of whom have now become well-to-do retirees, professionals or business proprietors and have time to enjoy choral singing – but are treating it as a leisure activity, hobby or social gathering rather than a noble cause, unlike the past. With this changing outlook and attitude towards singing, many Chinese choirs blossomed in the last two decades. Most of the members are closely affiliated with their alma mater, a clan association, or a singing teacher's studio. Because of the affiliation and common music interest, choral singing has become the medium that bonds them together. A quick survey reveals that 15 out of 25 choirs of the Choral Association belong to this category.

Next, consider the arrival of foreign-trained musicians. From the 1980s there has been another steady stream of Chinese immigrants with various musical backgrounds coming to Singapore. Although their initial plan might have been to seek employment in local private music schools, media and recording studios and other music industries, some of them ended up as private music teachers or choir conductors. Sometimes choirs approached them because of the dire shortage of local conductors. Occasionally, spouses of working professionals with music qualifications have provided another form of expertise local choirs could take advantage of, with musicians coming from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan, as well as China. Though the number fluctuates, there are at least 10 choirs that engage foreign-trained conductors.

Ample financial support to the Association's major projects from the government offices, private organisations and foundations, and individuals is another important element. The Association is blessed with having generous sponsorship from the National Arts Council, the Arts Fund, Lee Foundation, Hong Leong Foundation, Composers and Authors Society of Singapore and individual patrons such as Ong Pang Boon, former cabinet minister and former director of Hong Leong Holdings; Poh Choon Ann, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Poh Tiong Choon Logistics; and philanthropist Wee Bee Hoon. Often, they extend their generosity to other choirs, too.

Perhaps, the most crucial factor is that there are dedicated committee members who are able to work as a team for the projects. The core committee of the Choral Association includes at least one representative from each choir. The general practice is that the Association Chair convenes the regular meetings while an organising Chair is chosen for each of its projects. In the recent past, Lee Yuk Chuan has been effective at initiating

ideas and Lim Lay Ngoh has been a very competent executive, but the credit must also go to the entire committee that has worked relentlessly and unselfishly together whenever duty called. This is why mobilising almost a thousand singers for the grand finale at the Esplanade Concert Hall and hosting choirs from abroad during major events does not seem too daunting a task for the Choral Association.

The Next Lap

Whether planned or unplanned, Chinese Choral activities in Singapore will occupy a special place in local music history. More than 70 years after the visit of the Wuhan Choir, the Chinese choral movement still appears healthy and vibrant. But the question remains: is it sustainable? Through interacting with the Choral Association and its committee, this writer is concerned that the current vibrancy may not last in the long term. There are at least four areas that require immediate attention.

1. Ageing membership and shortage of young recruits

Though no official data is available, by looking at the singers performing on stage, one can easily estimate the mean age of most choirs to be 60, or older. In an attempt to counter this trend, Metro Philharmonic Society has revived its youth choir and introduced non-Chinese repertoires to attract younger singers. For other choirs, it may be time to consider doing the same.

2. Declining musical standards

The ageing issue has direct bearing on singing skills and overall musicianship. The human voice deteriorates with age. With such a high mean age among the choirs, it is not an easy feat to sing effectively unless one already has existing good vocal habits, or is determined to improve. Musicianship will suffer similarly if good habits and basic skills are not learned at a young age. If improvement is not forthcoming in both areas, the weekly rehearsal could simply be a leisure and social event for most, instead of providing a means to scale greater heights in music-making.

3. Dwindling audience support

The standard of choral singing and audience patronage are correlated. In recent years, members of the Choral Association have been putting up concerts with great effort and enthusiasm. The reality is that most concerts are not well attended. On average, attendance is about 50 percent in an auditorium of modest size, despite encouragement from the Association requesting members to support one another. Besides, there are more concerts in Singapore nowadays and audiences are spoiled for choice, choosing instead to skip a local event. Of course, increasing ticket prices may prevent some from attending concerts regularly.

4. Increasing expenditure and overheads

All choirs, including those with the Choral Association, are non-profit organisations. Fortunately, most of their recent projects were patronised by organisations and people that support the arts. It is a known fact that the cost of living has gone up several fold in Singapore in recent years. There is a price for renting venues for rehearsals and concerts, equipment, printing and other related items. Taken together, all of this translates into higher ticket prices for audiences and operating budgets for the choirs.

The choirs are not totally ignorant of the challenges they now face and have been working hard to find long-term solutions. It is with a sincere hope that when these issues are properly addressed, a new phase in Chinese choral activity will begin.

Note

- 1 In 1955, Chae Keng Song was a member of the Rediffusion Youth Choir, Poh Choon Ann, conductor of Tongluo and Chair of Concert Organising Committee, and Lee Yuk Chuan, a member of Industrial and Commercial Old Boys Association; the programme was printed beforehand to promote ticket sales.

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