

BAND TOGETHER

PROJECT SYMPHONY SEES 50 ORDINARY S'POREANS COME TOGETHER AS AN ORCHESTRA

MAYO MARTIN
mayo@mediacorp.com.sg



Can you take 50 ordinary Singaporeans and turn them into a world-class orchestra in a matter of 10 weeks — when they make their debut in a public concert at a big venue?

That was a challenge that conductor Jason Lai gamely took on.

The 41-year-old associate conductor of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and principal conductor of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music orchestra has been preparing his unusual band of musicians, collectively called Project Symphony, for a concert next week at the Singapore Conference Hall. The symphony's unique journey will also be the subject of an eight-part television documentary series, which will start airing Oct 7 on MediaCorp okto.

It has been quite the ride for the British-born Lai, who was previously assistant conductor with the BBC Philharmonic. "I've always been interested in community orchestras and conducted a lot back in England. When I was approached (to do this project), I thought, 'Wow, this is great.'"

But even for Lai, this particular orchestra's make-up is quite unique, comprising amateur musicians of all ages (from an eight-year-old child to adults) who come from different walks of life and playing all kinds of instruments, not only those that are traditionally seen in Western classical music.

"You've got pipas, the kompong, there's an Indian violinist, Brazilian percussionists. The make-up of Singapore is literally in the project of the orchestra," he said.

With such a diverse mix of participants comes an interesting collection of backgrounds and stories, including that of amateur flautist Wilfred Lee. The 39-year-old private tutor has been playing the flute from a young age with pop concert bands and, currently, the Bukit Batok



Conductor Jason Lai instructing his merry band of musicians making up Project Symphony.

Community Club Band, West Winds.

Project Symphony is his first orchestra. He had sent an audition video after finding out about the project through a friend's Facebook post. There's another element that makes his participation extra special: Three years ago, he was diagnosed with nose cancer, which is now under remission. Interestingly enough, it was this bout with cancer that made him decide to play music again, a hobby that had taken a backseat when he began focusing on his work (first, as a school teacher and later, running his own tuition centre).

Lee is still within the so-called "five-year mark" time-frame of his battle with cancer and joining a symphony is part of his bucket list. "You never know what's going to happen, so you try to live your life a little bit more. You'd want to look for a lot of experiences," said Lee, who said that rehearsals have pretty much been normal, except for the constant presence of a water bottle. Radiotherapy sessions had affected his salivary

glands, and saliva is quite important in playing wind instruments like the flute.

"I'll be one of those with a water bottle by my side. I'll have to sip some water during the parts I'm not playing," he said.

Beyond the music, Project Symphony has also been a good way for the diverse range of participants to interact during the weekly rehearsals held every Friday and Sunday.

"I never really had friends who played string instruments, but now I know some; you'd talk to them a little bit, say hi and bye," said Lee, who added that it's also been interesting interacting with the younger set. "The flautist I sit next to is only 16. She's not my student, so I talk to her on an equal footing. It's quite interesting to get a glimpse into what they are into. My age group talk over Facebook, but to them it's all Twitter and hashtags. We have members who are eight, nine years old and they're keeping up with Jason's high expectations, too."

As for Lai, while he did try to main-

tain a certain standard (and despite the occasional frustration of people turning up late or missing rehearsals), at the end of the day, it has been about the transformative journey of the group.

"I found that this incredible group of people managed, in a very short amount of time, to become a community, not just in name but in spirit — they just pulled together and worked so incredibly hard that even I'm surprised at what we've achieved. I don't necessarily think anyone will be walking into SSO (after the concert), but what it has shown is, if we work hard enough, we can achieve anything. Their love for music comes forward," he said.

> The Project Symphony Grand Concert will be held on Sept 20, 7.30pm, at the Singapore Conference Hall, 7 Shenton Way. Tickets are free upon registration at <http://projectsymphonyfinal.peatix.com>. Meanwhile, the Project Symphony documentary will air from Oct 7 to Nov 25, 10pm, on MediaCorp okto.