

A beautiful bridge to the world of music

Orchestra of the Music Makers, led by a group of young volunteers, even allows the audience to sit among players

Wong Shiying

Nestled among violinists on the stage of the Esplanade concert hall in January this year, student Gracia Ong, 17, was among 26 participants who sat within an orchestra during a concert – an opportunity that does not come by often.

“It was an eye-opening experience. I felt my spirits soar with the pulse of the music,” she said.

The Orchestra of the Music Makers (OMM) is the first among two orchestras in Singapore, the other being the Asian Contemporary Ensemble, to allow its audience to appreciate classical music at such close proximity to the performers.

This practice, done on an ad hoc basis, seeks to “debunk the stereotype that the arts are only for the elite and the educated”, said OMM’s founding president, Mr Lee Guan Wei, 29, who plays the violin.

OMM is a youth-led volunteer orchestra set up in 2008. Under the baton of Associate Professor Chan Tze Law, 53, the associate director of Singapore’s Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, OMM has made great strides in the past nine years.

Besides achieving musical excellence, its vision of pursuing philan-

thropy through music has seen it raise \$7 million for charity on platforms such as ChildAid, an annual charity concert jointly organised by *The Straits Times* and *The Business Times*.

OMM receives funding from private and public sponsors. Its biggest supporters are HSBC, the National Arts Council (NAC), School of the Arts Singapore (Sota), Keppel Corporation and the Lee Foundation.

The idea for the orchestra arose in 2006 when a group of teenage boys, who were members of the orchestra in their schools, wanted to continue making music after graduation.

For the next two years, they reached out to like-minded peers, but lacked a platform to perform.

The opportunity finally came in 2008 when the organisers of the HSBC Youth Excellence Awards were in urgent need of an orchestra.

“Within 48 hours, I received 72 names – the equivalent of a full orchestra,” said OMM chairman Goh Kong Aik, 53, director of strategic communications at the Urban Redevelopment Authority.

Mr Goh, previously an HSBC employee, was one of the organisers of the HSBC awards.

Said Prof Chan: “The HSBC concert was the catalyst OMM needed and it optimised it.”

Even so, staging a concert with no resources was no easy feat. To fund costs such as renting percussion instruments and concert venue, totalling \$20,000, OMM got a \$4,000 grant from the NAC, found sponsors and paid out of their own pockets.

Within a year, OMM had three sold-out concerts and was the first group to win the HSBC Youth Excellence Award for Music in 2009, bagging \$200,000.

Today, the ensemble has around 180 active members, from secondary school students to twenty-somethings in national service or the workforce.

Said current president Toh Xue Qian, 24, who plays the viola: “All of us at OMM are volunteers. Regardless of how busy we are with our job, we make time to rehearse, in the evening or over the weekends.”

While OMM’s members may not be professional musicians, they are certainly not unskilled.

Last year, international reviewer Robert Markow said in German opera publication *Der Neue Merker* that OMM is “a reflection of Singapore – an orchestra that has existed for a mere seven years, yet has fashioned itself into a model of organisational and musical excellence”.

Through outreach activities, such as partnering Sota to run camps, giving students the experience of playing in an orchestra, OMM seeks to spread the love for music to the heartland.

As founding member Mr Lee put it: “The chasm between ideals and reality often can’t be crossed, but build the most beautiful bridge you can anyway.”

sywong@sph.com.sg

• OMM’s next concert, titled *Sibelius 1*, will be on July 17 at the Sota Concert Hall. Tickets priced between \$12 and \$19 are available from Sistic. For more details, visit OMM’s website at www.orchestra.sg



Some of the OMM members at the Esplanade: (standing from left) Candice Lau, 28, Toh Xue Qian, 24, Lee Guan Wei, 28, Herbert Fan, 29, Amelia Leo, 26, and Goh Eng Han, 21; and (seated from left) Christopher Cheong, 27, Yeo Ying Hao, 25, Tan Yao Cong, 28, and Alwyn Loy, 23. The group was started by former school orchestra members who wanted to continue making music. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG