



CULTURAL
MEDALLION
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JENNIFER THAM SOW YING

MUSIC

Jennifer Tham was born in Singapore in 1962. She received a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Sociology from the National University of Singapore in 1985. She went on to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Music, training as a composer, at the Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada, from where she graduated in 1995.

Jennifer has directed the Singapore Youth Choir (now the SYC Ensemble Singers) since 1986, appointed by the conductor then, Mr David Lim. Under her leadership, the group has travelled to and excelled at numerous prestigious international choral festivals, including the Tallinn'94 International Choir Festival in Estonia (1994), the Concorso Internazionale di Canto Corale "CA Seghizzi", the Concorso Polifonico Internazionale in Italy (2004, 2010) and the Tolosa Choral Contest in Spain (2007). Awards include First Place in the Youth Choirs category at the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod (Wales, 1989), First Place in the Light Music competition at the International Koorfestival (Arnhem, the Netherlands, 1991), Second Place in the Youth Choirs category at the Llangollen International Music Eisteddfod (Wales, 1998), Gold Award in the Small Choirs category at the International Festival of Christmas and Advent Music (Prague, Czech Republic, 2002) and the Festival Grand Prix and the Awards of the Marshal of Pomeranian Province, the Mayor of Gdansk and the Mayor of Sopot, at the International Choir Festival Mundus Cantat Sopot (Sopot, Poland, 2011). Jennifer is also the Artistic Director of the Young Musicians' Society (YMS) since its incorporation as a non-profit arts company in 1996. At YMS, she has helped developed music pedagogy programmes

including the Kodaly Seminar Asia in collaboration with the Kodaly Institute of the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music in Budapest, Hungary.

Jennifer is actively involved in the international choral community. She is an elected Board member of the International Federation for Choral Music (IFCM). For IFCM, she served as the Artistic Director of the Asia South Pacific Symposium on Choral Music (Singapore, 2001) and a member of the Artistic Committee for the World Symposium on Choral Music (Kyoto, Japan, 2005), among other roles. She currently coordinates IFCM projects for the Asia Pacific region, including the Asia Pacific Youth Choir. She is Singapore's representative on the World Choir Council and has served as a juror at many choir competitions including the World Choir Games (2006, 2008, 2010, 2012), the Grieg International Choral Festival (2009) and the Tomohon International Choir Competition (2010).

Jennifer taught choral pedagogy and direction at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts from 2001 to 2008, and is on the teaching faculty at the Kodaly Seminar

Asia. She has given workshops and lectures worldwide on choral conducting and pedagogy, rehearsal technique and voice-building as well as on the choral music of Singapore. She was the Principal Lecturer at the Lithuanian Conductors Summer Academy (2008), hosted in part by Lithuania's Ministry of Culture. Jennifer serves as music director and conductor of several school choirs including that of the Singapore Management University, Temasek Junior College, River Valley High School, Dunman High School, Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus (Toa Payoh), Methodist Girls' School and St. Andrew's Secondary School.

She was conferred the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council in 1992 and the Artistic Excellence Award by the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore in 2011.



Magic, Moonlight and Madmen
SYC Ensemble Singers (2007)

JENNIFER THAM

CHORAL DIRECTOR, PEDAGOGUE AND VISIONARY

By Duana Chan and Kelly Tang

A brilliant and inspiring musician, Jennifer is known to be a champion of living composers whose capable musical decisions have changed the landscape of choral music in the Asia South Pacific region of the world, and globally. At home, she has received awards by the National Arts Council (Young Artist Award, 1992 and Cultural Medallion, 2012) and the Composers and Authors Society of Singapore (Artistic Excellence Award, 2011). In the international choral community, Jennifer is extolled for enriching the cultural life of her beautiful country and for building a choral community in Singapore, as well as her dedicated efforts toward the promotion and advancement of the tradition of artistic excellence in choral music in her country and worldwide.

As a globally recognised artist and world class conductor, Jennifer's willingness to experiment with innovative ideas, both musical and technological is exemplified in her work as choir and artistic director of the SYC Ensemble Singers. One of Singapore's true artistic treasures, and a musical visionary par excellence, Jennifer's contribution to the development of young and mature choirs in Asia and Singapore is manifold and extraordinary for a field she has come largely to develop and shape towards maturation.

Early in her childhood, Jennifer was exposed to the arts and music by her mother, Anna Tham, and father, Tham Tuck Onn. A music aficionado whose 'truly eclectic' records spanned Shirley Bassey and Doris Day with Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, young Jennifer's father inspired and instilled in her a lifelong love for a prismatic range of music. Another key figure and mentor in Jennifer's musical development was Singaporean composer Leong Yoon Pin, a frequent breakfast companion of her father. Leong always encouraged and inspired Jennifer to experience music for all its intrinsic colours and possibilities.

Jennifer's first encounter with contemporary choral music came via a young Maestro Lim Yau's brief stint as Singapore Youth Choir (SYC) conductor upon return from musical studies in Europe. This brief acquaintance with contemporary choral music brought to the SYC elicited, in Jennifer, a sense of marvel and wonder, and for the possibility of Singapore's choirs to engage in contemporary choral structures.

After obtaining a BA in Philosophy and Sociology from the National University of Singapore and working in a range of professional careers, (while conducting the SYC since 1986), Jennifer embarked on a separate academic degree in Music and Composition at Simon Fraser University (British Columbia, Canada). There, she learnt to 'listen for sounds within a sound' from some of the leading exponents of contemporary music at the time. After graduating at the top of her class with high honours, Jennifer returned to Singapore to work as the choir conductor of the SYC (1996) and the Artistic Director of the Young Musicians' Society (YMS), with which the former is affiliated. Her husband, Albert Yeo, fellow SYC-chorister, took the helm of the YMS as its General Manager, a role which he has fulfilled through an array of quiet and unflinching implementations for the group ever since.

Jennifer's early forays into choral conducting were exceptional for her highly imaginative and brilliantly nuanced interpretations with the SYC, now the SYC-Ensemble Singers (renamed since 2004). Currently its longest-standing conductor, she first was given the helm of the SYC from former choir director David Lim in 1986, and through this transition, led the choir to another prize-winning First at the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod in Wales (1989) – a formidable accomplishment for so young an ensemble.

Jennifer has since led the SYC Ensemble Singers (SYC-ES) to even greater musical heights. A mature ensemble for 'the serious choral hobbyist with high expectations', (as Jennifer avers), the SYC-ES is now an astoundingly accomplished choral outfit known for sharp, nuanced, brilliant work, and particularly in the precision, emotion, and expository quality of contemporary



musical forms. As a forward-looking choir which perfects the works of living composers, Jennifer's exceptionally conceptual programming sees to a comprehensive range of choral repertoire which spans over 800 years of musical history with contrastive magnitude and scale, from performances of medieval motets and the soaring 16th century liturgical works of Palestrina and Byrd, to the modern and contemporary 21st century choral music for which it has garnered stunning acclaim.

Over the years, Jennifer and the internationally prize-winning SYC-ES have received an array of accolades and awards at prestigious international choral festivals, from Italy to Poland. Voices of the newly recorded *Majulah Singapura* in chorus with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (2000), they have also been featured in the radio programmes and broadcasts of Sweden and Germany. Together, the SYC-ES and Jennifer have traversed beyond *de facto* national youth choir to a mature and dynamic ensemble, 'one of the best in the Asian region', and internationally acclaimed for bringing to life modern music in stunning and compelling ways.

'A veritable model' of choral direction, as William McVicker recalls, Jennifer's conducting technique has been described as one of 'liberated and natural flow' countervailed by a minimalistic eloquence that bespeaks itself. The Swedish-American contemporary jazz pianist, composer, and recording artist Steve Dobrogosz calls her an 'exceptional' choir conductor with 'inspirational leadership' and 'rare, musical understanding.' Known for 'perfect mastery over rhythm, dynamics, pitch, articulation, and timbre [that] allows music to spring alive from within', as Kelly Tang notes, Jennifer succeeds in bringing to the choir conducting that draws precise and nuanced interpretations of exceptional vitality and shimmering emotional depth.

In superficially abstruse works of multi-dimensional tones, rhythms and harmonic complexities, Jennifer's remarkable consilience and a rare ability to constellate and bridge seemingly

riven disciplines demonstrates an extraordinary grasp of a range of musical forms, genres, and structures. This brings to life captivatingly evocative musical realisations of post-modern works that elicit and stir mood and movement. The choir inhabits, as an 'ethereal, shape-shifting' form, 'each new work it touches, [and] the uniqueness that is the compositions itself, remarkable for startling accuracy, incisive precision, myriad shades, and expressive depths across a range of prismatic structures, even in the most difficult of post-modern choir pieces.

Technically, Jennifer's is a lucidly birds-eye view that sees a composer's hidden lines of vision and brings such to light with startling effects where many may remain lost. As Kelly Tang notes, hers is a rare musical gifting that senses 'the composer' with 'uncanny precision', and whose 'immaculate technique' brings rivetingly to life 'the inner musical message.' From apparently broken or disconnected parts, Jennifer appears to perceive and to construct astounding structural wholes. As composer Kelly Tang recalls, 'each time I hear the SYC perform a choral work of mine, I am struck by how painstakingly each line is shaped, each dynamic adjusted, each rhythm timed, and each texture trimmed in perfect sympathy and telepathy with what I had originally intended the music to utter.' Her realisations of new musical visions 'magically complete the compositional process by creatively realising the score in a way that builds congruently upon the composer's intent.' The SYC-ES, under Jennifer's direction, is an 'oasis for living composers yearning for their inner cries to be heard.'

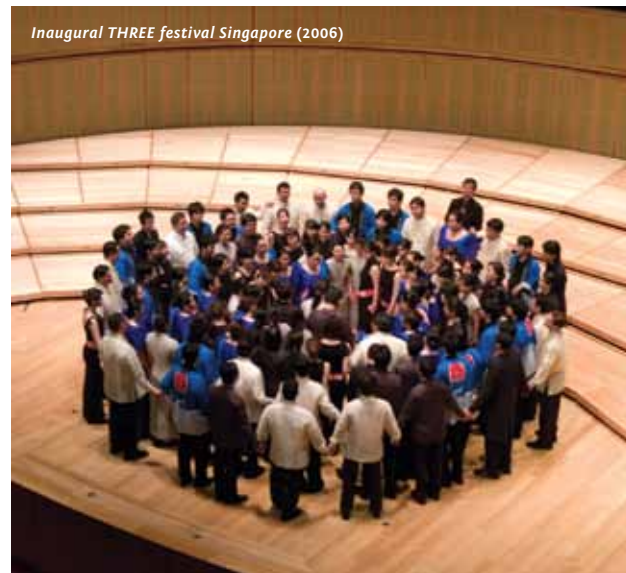
In a cultural climate where musical 'newness' is often all-too-quickly transposed into ephemerality – music heard perhaps once, and never again – the SYC-ES's repeated performances gift both choir and audiences new musical affinities. Avid proponents of local and contemporary choral music, the SYC-ES and Jennifer have premiered and explored a vast expanse of choral works by local composers Leong Yoon Pin, Phoon Yew Tien, Kelly

Tang, Joyce Koh, Goh Toh Chai, Hoh Chung Shih, and new choir composer Americ Goh, whose music is now and increasingly part of their musical stable and fold. Of the 50 compositions composed for or gifted to the choir by choral compositional greats such as Alberto Grau (Venezuela), Vytautas Miškinis (Lithuania), Eskil Hemberg (Sweden), Corrado Margutti (Italy), Ryan Cayabyab (the Philippines), Ko Matsushita (Japan) and Rita Ueda (Canada), more than half are by Singapore's composers. Under Jennifer's direction, atelier choirs, choristers, and even conductors halfway around the world, from Bandung, Indonesia, to Vilnius, Lithuania, have heard, experienced, and warbled Singaporean choir compositions through Jennifer's unflinching exports of local music in international settings.

Jennifer's advancing of new works by living composers has brought about an unusual synergy between composers, choirs, and international audiences alike. Her artistic visions, shored and realised by Albert's extraordinary structural implementations for the non-profit, amateur singing ensemble comprising working professionals of various starting vocal abilities from all walks of life, have granted local compositions greater exposure and opportunities to be heard and remembered by a choir which has since attained international stature and critical acclaim. This remarkable synthesis of choir, audience, and composer, advanced by the SYC-ES's unwavering courage to map, champion and charter sounds hitherto unheard and unknown, and as expert interpreters of innovation in musical form, help us to forge tomorrow's greats in now and present music.

The musical void the SYC-ES fills as a mature choir in the present choral music scene is all-the-more remarkable for the light in which it stands. In a marked absence of systems or umbrella administrations under which multiple choristers may be volunteer-members, not many mature choirs exist – or even can. Of the mature choirs that do exist in Singapore, most sing traditional, predominantly 'classical, repertory-based' work. Not many of these mature choirs are inclined to tackle adventitiously difficult or even dissonant musical forms of the present and future. Even fewer interpret more difficult, contemporary works the way the SYC-ES does, and with 'such power of musical and human expression.'

The result is a disparity all-the-more remarkable for an asymmetry between the high-level of musical skill and practical proficiency that school-leaving choristers have come to attain, and the low, precipitous, and steep decline in adult choir participation in lifelong ensemble singing after student-choir-days cease. Against this backdrop, Jennifer's métier as choir director, practitioner, and pedagogue stands all-the-more sharply as work that reaches the younger generation and what they may become, or even yet realise.



Inaugural THREE festival Singapore (2006)

Where musical effects of a mature choral musicianship would have otherwise been stratified, kept in orbit around performances or locked within fixed choral circles, Jennifer and the SYC-ES's self-same volunteerism takes active steps in musical outreach activities for people from all walks of life, all-year-round. Firm adherents of hands-on learning that will flourish ever beyond the schoolroom, Jennifer works with SYC-ES to conduct "Hand-in-Hand, Voice-with-Voice" (1997-), a volunteer endeavour that sees the choir engaging student-choristers through workshops, and further inviting them to learn by rehearsing and performing alongside mature singers in the SYC-ES's concert performances.

Outside of her work in musical performance, conducting and programming, Jennifer works actively with school-choirs. Her work with young adults and teenagers is still brilliant, as internationally featured in *The Singer*, a leading choral publication in the UK. In the younger generation and the future of choirs in Singapore she nurtures, inspires, and builds tremendous choral fundamentals for a range of choirs from secondary schools to tertiary and collegiate institutions. Presently the director of nine school-choirs, many of Jennifer's students have benefitted through her quiet laying of strong musical and technical foundations, and to pursued professional careers in music and the arts. Jennifer's work in music education has also influenced choral conducting and choir practice in Singapore. At the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) she developed and taught the curriculum for the academic and degree modules in Choral Training and Direction and Directed Studies in Choral Conducting respectively (2001-2008). With the YMS, Jennifer launched First Aid for Choirs and Conductors (2002-) and the Kodaly Seminar Asia (2009-) – platforms where educators and choir conductors can better their choral practice.

Jennifer's extensive work in advancing and cohering new vantages for Asian choral music is also manifest in her international endeavours. The Asia South Pacific Symposium on Choral Music (Singapore, 2001) she jointly organised and administered with husband Albert and 'a small group of young professionals' from Singapore is still vividly recalled by the President of the International Federation for Choral Music (IFCM) as an colossal event that reflects her 'tenacious spirit' as a 'massive undertaking' that 'literally brought the world to Singapore to witness exceptional choral music from [this] region of the world.' As the symposium's Artistic Director, she brought 'the main music of the region' and 'the treasures of all kinds of choral music in Singapore' in an 'eye opener and door opener to the field of Asian-Pacific choral music.'

Marrying music with conscience and heart, Jennifer's work with the IFCM – with a mission 'to exchange cultures through choral music' – also represents her passion for a wider, deeply meaningful social and diplomatic cause: the fostering of peace between nations through choral music. In this vein, Jennifer's has led SYC-ES in sharing a stage with two top choirs in Japan and the Philippines – respectively the Gaia Philharmonic Chorus (with Ko Matsushita) and the Ateneo Chamber Singers (with Jonathan Velasco). The trio's biennial *Three* has garnered international acclaim as a leading project for Asian choral music in recent years, a project whose 'artistic level . . . is exceptionally high',

ABOUT THE WRITERS

Duana Chan is an art writer, currently pursuing her Masters in the Humanities and Social Thought at the New York University
Kelly Tang is a composer, and a recipient of the Cultural Medallion. He is the Dean of Arts at School of The Arts (SOTA)

This article with a list of references is available via the National Arts Council website at www.nac.gov.sg

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“ I thank the following people for being part of who and where I am, for this award belongs also to them:

My father, Mr Tham Tuck Onn, for teaching me to read and giving me a love of poetry and text, from whom I inherit an eclectic taste in music.

My mother, Mrs Anna Tham, for teaching me the art of giving through leading by example, and that anything worth doing is worth doing with all our heart.

The late Mr Leong Yoon Pin, for showing us what love for nation meant, in his music, through his belief in the importance of our work; and for giving me confidence as a young conductor.

The late Eskil Hemberg (Sweden), whose generosity of spirit and trust in our artistic vision gave us wings.

as Marian Dolan, Director of the IFCM's International Voices conferences observes. But *Three* was first and always premised as a shared work of 'kindred spirits' in 'response to . . . violence' and for humanitarian ideals such as that people who 'come from different countries [can] share the same language – music.' The concerts are not about her, but 'the composers, the singers, the listeners, and the ideas presented in the music. The emphasis is on the totality, and greater than the sum of its parts.'

As Kelly Tang notes, 'music's progress in Singapore can be measured by the tension between the regressive predominance of surface glitter, the pursuit of prizes, and merciless mechanical motion, and on the other hand, the progressive exploration of our spiritual human core as the impetus of artistic expression. In this struggle, Jennifer Tham's unwavering passion in pursuing substance over sensation is a beacon in the darkness, enlightening like-minded musicians to abandon hollow triviality in search of soulfulness through music.' In this 'still-evolving choral scene', Jennifer's multiple advents to choral development, and each branch at the pinnacle of artistic excellence, are perennially beneficial in the multiple paving of many strong, hitherto unformed, and presently inter-connected paths that will last for many years yet, and for the younger generations of school-choirs, composers, choristers, and mature singing ensembles of the present and future.

Dr Rodney Sharman (Canada), for giving me ears and honing my musical sense and sensibilities, at and beyond Simon Fraser University.

Mr Lim Yau, for inspiring my love for contemporary choral music; Mr Phoon Yew Tien, Dr Kelly Tang, Joyce Bee Tuan Koh and Hoh Chung Shih for their music of the future; Jonathan Velasco (Philippines) and Ko Matsushita (Japan) for conspiring with us to shape the choral future of this region.

Mr David Lim, for trusting me with the Singapore Youth Choir; all past and present members of the SYC and SYC Ensemble Singers, who have tirelessly wrestled with the whys and wherefores of music with us.

My husband, Albert Yeo, without whom this would be meaningless. ”