

Chen Zhangyi

***Composing a Singapore Trilogy Through Laksa, Shopping, and
Kopi***

This essay muses on the nature of what constitutes Singaporean performance and whether Singaporean music exists. I am a composer born and bred in Singapore, and in some definitions, any work that I compose could be considered Singaporean. However, this may be an oversimplification of the complex nature of any artistic endeavor, what it represents or for whom it is intended. For many Singaporeans, nothing is more iconic with Singapore than its hybrid and multicultural food traditions. The diversity of fused flavors captures the myriad ways in which ‘local ’cultures have blended through coexistence of various sorts. Food traditions represent a safe haven where many derive a kind of pride that transcends specific ethnic cultural boundaries. Because of this, my colleagues and I decided that we would write some short operas revolving around Singaporean food. In what follows, I contextualize the genesis of the resulting trilogy, cover the broad narratives of each opera, identify various musical references, outline some of the performance considerations, and demonstrate how the three works are threaded together to form what I call a Singaporean triptych. Through the period of our working together, we discovered that writing in Singlish – a local language formed from various aspects of English, Malay, and various Chinese languages – and our ongoing search for an elusive Singaporean sound emerged as integral elements of the compositional process and the works themselves. While this essay began as an auto-ethnographic account documenting my collaboration with local and international artists and presenting analysis of parts of the operas, it has become something of an artistic manifesto, exploring the cultural implications of creation and performance in Singapore, processes that test the senses and transcend boundaries.

PART I: “Laksa Cantata” (2012-2013)

Anecdote #1: Everything Happens for a Reason

It was the fall of 2011. I had just received a call from the choral composer and conductor Eric Whitacre. The phone conversation went like this:

Chen: Hello (In a jet-lagged voice)

Whitacre: Yes, may I speak to Zhangyi Chen please?

Chen: Yes (Sleepily)

Whitacre: I am so sorry to call this early. This is Eric Whitacre calling from Abbey Road Studios in London.

Chen: Oh, (Slightly surprised)

Whitacre: and,

Chen: that's fine... (Trying to sound more awake)

(Laughs from both)

Whitacre: We're just calling to congratulate, you've been selected as one of the winners for the (80th Anniversary Abbey Road Studios) Anthem Competition!

This was my first big break into the international music scene. The following month, I found myself in London to work with the London Symphony Orchestra and Eric Whitacre, along with his exceptional choral group, to record my composition *Ariadne's Love*.¹ It was a momentous event and turning point in my artistic life, because it meant that my efforts as a composer were beginning to be taken seriously by people other than my close circle of advisors and colleagues.

After some preliminary meetings with the London performers, I thought to myself, "time to meet up with folks from Singapore!" I arranged to meet my friends Ziliang, Bingling, and Colin at a café. A pianist, a violinist, and a clarinetist, they were all studying in music colleges in London at that time. Ziliang (the pianist) well known amongst our friends for his poker face, asked me this question point blank: "Zhangyi, we're thinking of asking you to compose a piece for us, and the story should have something to do with food. Laksa. Something in the vein of Bach's "Coffee Cantata". Are you interested?" I laughed out loud, because I really thought that he was joking with me. He was not. In fact, he was utterly serious about presenting music with Singaporean food.

Ziliang went on to explain his rationale, expanding on his desire to promote Singaporean culture and make sense of his identity as a Singaporean musician

¹ <https://soundcloud.com/abbeyroad/ariadnes-love-zhangyi-chen> accessed on Oct. 11, 2020.

both inside and outside of Singapore. He gave me an early version of his (now) oft-quoted advocacy for a Singaporean musical identity (Nanda 2014), “I find it ironic that though we are born in Singapore, we mostly play composers from the Western tradition. As someone born in Ang Mo Kio², what do Bach or Beethoven have to do with me?”³ After looking at him for a while, I said I’ll give it some thought. After the Abbey Road trip, I began to develop a more nuanced perspective on the definition of a serious composition, I eventually decided to join Ziliang in developing this idea. An unusual subject matter for a chamber opera might not be such a bad idea. After all, as Ziliang had suggested, Bach did compose a very successful cantata based on the theme of coffee. If a beverage-themed libretto worked for him, a food-themed libretto could very well work for me and my trio of friends.

Not too far into the project, I asked another good friend of mine, Jack Lin⁴, if he might be willing to try his hand at writing a libretto about *laksa*. At that time, he was approaching a crossroads in his own career, deciding between pursuing more graduate studies or leaving academia to find an arts-related job in the working world. Recollecting how it all began, Jack wrote in the programme notes for the 2018 production of “A Singapore Trilogy”:

It all started on the Number Seven train in New York City in 2011. (...) Zhangyi had come over to stay with me at my cousin’s place, and it was on one of those days when we explored Manhattan that he told me of a proposal for a new chamber opera. It turned out he was commissioned from another friend, Song Ziliang, when he visited London earlier in that year. When he told me that the ‘would be’ subject as *laksa*, but based on Bach’s Coffee Cantata, I didn’t know whether he was serious or just pulling my leg. But I was intrigued, even though I didn’t quite believe him, just yet. Come to think of it, it was probably a combination of having finished school, being unemployed and in New York during the holiday, which convinced me to take a leap of faith to actually think about taking on this project (Lin 2018).

² The neighbourhood is a relatively old residential area in the North-eastern region of Singapore. The term “Ang Mo Kio” could be literally understood as “tomato” or “Caucasian bridge”.

³ Taken from an interview with Akshita Nanda, Ziliang shared his philosophy on supporting local composers and musicians.

⁴ Australian by citizenship, Jack Lin was born to a Singaporean mother and Taiwanese father. During the course of the trilogy collaboration (2012-2018), he became a Permanent Resident of Singapore.

I thought that with Jack’s cultural kinship with Singapore and his long experience in music and writing, he could be the right person to pen a libretto for this project. When I visited him in New York City, I asked him if he was interested in writing the libretto for the *laksa* project. His eyes lit up, perhaps at the prospect of doing something not for an academic requirement. He quickly obliged and proceeded to produce the initial libretto drafts in remarkable speed. Based on Ziliang’s concept of recontextualizing Bach in Singapore and showcasing Singaporean cuisine culture through music, we gradually developed the project beyond a literal translation of the storyline and characters of the Bach Cantata. I provide a synopsis of the libretto below.

“Laksa Cantata” – Characters⁵

LEAH – soprano, fiancée of Stephen

STEPHEN – baritone (or tenor)

Instrumentation: violin, clarinet (in A) and piano

Synopsis

At the beginning of the opera, Stephen makes his first appearance as he is counting down the days and hours to his wedding. He is soon confronted by his fiancée Leah, who is “understandably” mad at him for his outrageous idea of serving *laksa* at their wedding banquet! He “faces the music” with Leah’s aria *A Woman’s Scorned*, in which she vents her frustrations. In the recitative, the couple argues and the *Laksa Aria* follows in which Stephen confesses his ardent love of *laksa*, and his firm intention to have it at the banquet. In the next dialogue, Leah tries to win the argument by threatening to have his future-mother-in-law stay with them in their new apartment. In the following recitative, they both appear to be thinking out loud individually, each reconsidering if she or he has gone too far in the silly fight and wondering whether it might compromise their relationship. In an attempt to resolve the tension, they launch into their first musical duet, *Agree to Disagree*.

⁵ Earlier versions of the libretto were even closer to Bach’s ‘*Coffee*’ Cantata, previously including a narrator as a third singer.

Leah then takes a step back and offers to agree to serve *laksa* at their wedding, while Stephen forgoes his initial idea – claiming that he’ll give up *laksa* for the good of their relationship. In their finale duet *A New Bowl is A New Day*, they sing in reconciliatory tones looking forward to their bright future ahead in matrimony.

Libretto and Musical References

Taking a ‘drop’ from Bach’s “Coffee Cantata” (BWV 211, *Schweigt stille, plaudert nicht*), Jack makes (some not so) subtle references to the Bach characters – Lieschen and Schlendrian. Borrowing the initials of these names, he transformed them into Leah and Stephen.⁶ Instead of a daughter (Lieschen) going against her father (Schlendrian) in pursuit of her love for coffee, rather, it was the fiancé Stephen scheming to orchestrate his favourite local Singaporean street food, *laksa* into their wedding banquet menu, a ridiculous idea that his wife-to-be Leah is naturally opposed to. In a Singaporean context, a typical Singaporean-Chinese wedding involves a grand, multi-course banquet of refined dishes served at a beautiful hotel ballroom, which is the socially accepted norm.⁷ The sight of any semblance of street food is to be assiduously avoided. Thus, in the Singaporean context, serving *Laksa* at a Singaporean wedding is probably more outrageous than serving Pizza at an American wedding.

The way Jack Lin has depicted marriage in this libretto has clear and intended references to Mozart/Da Ponte’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Jack’s libretto even borrows the way it begins, that is, with counting. In Act I, Scene 1 of *Le Nozze*, Figaro is simply measuring: “*cinque, dieci, venti, trenta*” (five, ten, twenty, thirty), the dimensions of the room that the Count has assigned for their bedchamber (Carter 1987:49-50). Our “*Laksa Cantata*” begins with Stephen measuring as well, but he is counting out the number of days left to their wedding. Marriage is, as elsewhere, an important milestone for families in Singapore, especially given that it has

⁶ It is common for Singaporean Chinese to have both a western name and a Chinese name. A typical Singaporean Chinese name romanized might be “Stephen Lee Si Wen”, where Lee is the family name, Si Wen is the given Chinese name, coming appropriately after the family name, and Stephen is the western name, placed appropriately in front of the family name.

⁷ Although the tradition of grand Singaporean-Chinese wedding banquets is slowly evolving, it remains a cultural icon, even a stereotype.

potentially life-changing consequences. Da Ponte's⁸ representation of dramatic conflict and resolution in *Le Nozze* actually resonates with the intensity of marriage planning among Singaporean, middle-class Chinese,⁹ in which the stakes of this familiar ritual are considerably high. Such a Singaporean-Chinese wedding easily involves hundreds of guests attending the banquet at a hotel, a pre-wedding photo shoot at a studio, a Housing & Development Board (HDB) housing loan, and all sorts of real-life drama leading up to the wedding ritual, and the inevitable, but nerve-wracking (before departure) honeymoon vacation. Thus, Jack's choice to set the "Laksa Cantata" in the two weeks leading up to their stressful (but lovely) wedding provides a dramatic context familiar to the audiences in Singapore.¹⁰ The references to the known works of "Coffee" Cantata and *Le Nozze* were our intentional homage to Bach and Mozart, and indicative of our musical education. The references were also part of our answer to Ziliang's question regarding the ways in which Singaporean musicians place ourselves in relation the Western canon of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven etc. In a general creative direction, I believe that one solution is to build our own Singaporean canon, even if it begins humbly by branching out directly from western repertoires.

There has been considerable interest in "Laksa Cantata" among my circle of musician friends, probably because of the particularly Singaporean subject matter of food within the Singaporean musical scene.¹¹ In particular, the composer/

⁸ Da Ponte wrote the libretto to *Le Nozze* based on the original play by Beaumarchais.

⁹ There are different traditions and practices for weddings of the different Singaporean ethnic groups. For our purposes here, I am referring to the Singaporean-Chinese wedding practices, one that I am familiar with.

¹⁰ I should note that the specific reference to *Le Nozze* would not necessarily be recognized by all Singaporean Chinese. Nevertheless, references to elements from international, elite culture of different sorts are common among middle and upper-middle-class Singaporean families, in which many children find themselves studying western classical music or other arts through their childhoods both in private lessons and at school. For those who do "catch" the specific reference to Mozart's work, there is an extra frisson of pleasure and recognition.

¹¹ There are some precedents and parallels of food-inspired Singaporean concert music. Leong Yoon Pin's choral *Street Calls* (1999) recreates a scene (before Hawker Centres) where various street foods are called out (mostly in Cantonese); and Emily Koh's *Jia[k]* (2015) is inspired by the deliciously chaotic Hawker-Centre soundscape. Her interesting portmanteau title simultaneously refers to home and "to eat" (in Teochew). There are further examples from the popular music scene.

pianist Jonathan Shin of maverick local instrumental band Lorong Boys¹² corresponded with me regarding the intertextuality of the work for an unpublished paper¹³ that he wrote, comparing the Bach/Picander inspiration with “Laksa Cantata”, side by side. Shin pointed out the obvious intertextual parallel of the desire to have something (see Fig. 1). In German, *lust*, or desire, is present in both the “Coffee Cantata” and “Laksa Cantata”, where Stephen’s desire to have *laksa* matches Lieschen’s desire for coffee.

Lieschen’s Kaffee Aria

Ei! Wie schmeckt der Kaffee süße
Lieblicher als tausend Küsse,
Milder als Muskatenein.
Kaffee, kaffee muss ich haben,
Und wenn jemand mich will laben,
Ach, so schenkt mir Kaffee ein!

(Translation)

Oh! How sweet the coffee tastes
Lovelier than a thousand kisses,
Smoother than Muskatenein wine.
Coffee, coffee I must have,
And if someone would like to
comfort me,
Ah, pour me some Coffee!¹⁴

Stephen’s Laksa Aria

A whiff of the velvety gravy
Makes my knees tremble with
delight.
After a hard day’s work, I curse
the weather, so hot! Imagine a
steaming bowl of laksa
Ah, my soul takes flight!
Restrain me for all I care,
But laksa, deny me not!

Indulge me in this sensuous brew,
Its tantalizing taste makes me
drool,
The concoction caresses my
senses,
Its seductive aroma makes me
breathless.
That spicy attraction fills my
heavenly dream,

¹² See www.lorongboys.com accessed Oct. 11, 2020.

¹³ Jonathan Shin’s unpublished paper, would later evolve to become his doctoral entrance paper titled “Setting a Creole to Music: Singlish from the Streets to the Stage through Chen Zhangyi’s “Laksa Cantata””.

¹⁴ Johann Sebastian Bach, “Schweigt Stille, Plaudert Nicht,” Bach-Gesellschaft Ausgabe Band 29, Plate B.W. XXIX (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1881): http://ks.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/3/39/IMSLP03358-Bach_-_BGA_-_BWV_211.pdf accessed Jun. 1, 2019. Libretto by 'Picander' Christian Friedrich Henrici.

The flawless complexion of white
 beehoon¹⁵, Wavering in the sea
 of coconut cream
 The taupok and the hae¹⁶ only
 make me swoon

As I ache for another potent
 pleasure.
 Indulge me in this decadent
 leisure
 A passion of the fiery laksa and
 my future wife,
 I need that extra kick in my life!

Figure 1: Shin's Intertextual comparison of *Kaffee Aria* and *Laksa Aria*

In our correspondence, we touched on the topic of the influence in terms of text and music, reception, and the effect of including vernacular references in the work. Unsurprisingly, he raises the perennial question of Singaporean musical identity.

Email from Jonathan Shin to me, dated Sat, Apr. 26, 2014:

Dear Zhangyi,

[...] I finally had the time to listen to your work from end to end.

I've always been interested in the question, "Does Singaporean music exist? Can we ever define it?" But that is the bigger umbrella question, which I'll allude to occasionally. For now the main focus is: what other pieces of music or literature were you inspired by when you wrote this cantata? I think I'll be right to assume Bach's Coffee Cantata was the kick-off point... I hear jazz-inspired rhythms too, but I want the composer's very own thoughts on this!

Also I was wondering if this has been performed overseas before, and if it has, how different audience reactions will be? Local audiences will obviously get the references, but audiences from other countries... I'm not so sure.

¹⁵ Bee-hoon (in Hokkien) refers to vermicelli noodles made of rice flour.

¹⁶ Typical ingredients of laksa: taupok refers to a kind of firm bean-curd that soaks up soup; hae refers to shrimp or prawn.

To sum up:

- 1) What pieces of music or literature were you inspired by when you wrote this cantata?
- 2) Were there any direct/indirect connotations of other musics in your cantata?
- 3) If this has been performed overseas before, and if it has, how different audience reactions will be?

On a personal level I was wondering if where you were writing this piece affected its conception, and the sort of music surrounding you while you were working on it.

Thanks for taking the time to answer my questions!

Regards, Jonathan

My reply to Jonathan Shin, dated Thu, May 1, 2014:

Hi Jonathan,

I'm not sure if this is still in time for your essay, but thank you for your interest in the piece. [...] Of course Singaporean music exists, no matter how elusive the definition, it is written everyday by my colleagues. At about the same time, I was working on my musical theatre work, *Pursuant*. As you can imagine, both are very much vernacular-inspired works – Singlish in particular. My other particularly Singaporean works are *Rain Tree*, (for orchestra), *A Carp Emerges* (percussion concerto), based on poems by local poets.

You are spot on, “Laksa Cantata” has its roots in Bach's ““““Coffee Cantata””””; *Pursuant*, the musical theatre work (words and book by Jonathan Lim), is inspired by Orwell's 1984, dystopia applied to Singapore's unique socio-political context.

Musically, “Laksa Cantata” has influences from diverging sources such as Bach's Cantata (formally: recits and arias), *Wozzeck* (timbral spectrum of speech to singing), Carter (polyrhythms), Bernstein (*Trouble in Tahiti*) etc. Harmonically, it is pretty close to my previous works, a nice segue to writing for the more populist-style of *Pursuant*.

Setting the colorful libretto of English peppered with Singlish obviously results in a vocal writing that is unique to our culture. I was really trying to musically recreate the Singlish accent and intonation through the vocal writing, not to mention the madrigalisms...Some instances In the *Laksa Aria* – Using pizzicato to reflect the bounciness of the *taupok*, and the swirling harmonies for the floating *beehoon*¹⁷ and indulgent concoction.

That's a good question, “Laksa Cantata” is not performed overseas yet. Perhaps it would be more suitable for Asian, and especially South East Asian audiences. The *Laksa Project* (spearheaded by Ziliang) is looking at opportunities

¹⁷ beehoon refers to the type of thin rice vermicelli served in Singaporean laksa.

to perform it overseas. The question is to retain the original texts or to re-adapt it for an English speaking or mandarin-speaking audience.
Cheers, Zhangyi”

Beyond clarifying the context of the compositional process and some of the direct textual and musical references within “Laksa Cantata”, more importantly, this email correspondence explores the issue of how “Laksa Cantata” might fit within the elusive description of Singaporean music. In this exchange we actually question whether the environment of the compositional process and location of its initial performance venue lend the work a certain identity. What makes this music Singaporean? Is it still Singaporean, if I composed some of it in Baltimore Maryland? It is plausible to draw the conclusion that the music that I was surrounded with at that point in time and space had a significant influence on the work as observed in my reply to Jonathan.¹⁸ Perhaps the evidence of these eclectic influences and factors of locale contribute to disperse any concrete definition of Singapore music or a Singaporean performance, other than one that embraces it as a product of a highly globalized and intercultural creative act. But are these questions too essentializing or too prosaic? My inclination to retain the local colors and intonation of “Laksa Cantata” even if we were to produce a performance abroad, still demands we recognize the localness of identity inherent in the work.¹⁹

¹⁸ As a graduate student, I was studying Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* and the music of Elliott Carter, and in turn was influenced by the spectrum of vocal timbres and rhythmic complexity. As baroque music enthusiasts, Jack and I have borrowed the baroque structures from Bach’s *Coffee Cantata*, and as freelance violinists playing one to a part in the same production of Bernstein’s *Trouble in Tahiti*.

¹⁹ The question of whether a composer’s environment, intended performance space and audience influences the cultural identity of a work would similarly apply to ““Window Shopping”, which was composed away from my home country but for a performance to be premiered in Singapore and discussed further below.



Figure 2: “Laksa Cantata” premiere (Photo credit: Siew Yi Li)

Performances and Reception

Characters

LEAH

STEPHEN

Premiere Cast (2012)

Rebecca Li, soprano

Kiat Goh, baritone

Cast (2018)

Ng Jingyun, soprano

Samuel Ng, tenor

Instrumentation

Violin

Clarinet (in A)

Piano (and répétiteur)

Ensemble (2012)

Wu Bingling

Colin Tan

Song Ziliang

Ensemble (2018)

Lim Hao Wei

Colin Tan

Cherie Khor

The “Laksa Cantata” was premiered in a semi-staged version (see Fig. 2), with the performers donning Peranakan costumes at the Arts House²⁰ on 12 July 2013 in conjunction with Singapore Food Festival. The connection between performing arts, language, and cuisine, is one that many have been thinking about. Linguist Nala Huiying Lee invokes the analogy of Peranakan food – a Singaporean cuisine created, primarily, by the Peranakan community in which Chinese and Malay people intermarried and in which influences from all the regional cultures can be tasted – in describing the nature of Singlish (Lee 2014:5). Singlish is the English-based creole spoken colloquially in Singapore. The style of Singlish any one person speaks depends not only on their own mother tongues, but also on the languages that are shared by one’s interlocutor. Lee (ibid.:5) notes that where cuisine is concerned, Peranakan cooking is a fusion of Chinese, local, and Western ingredients. The *iték tim* “duck soup” for example, comprises Chinese preserved vegetables, the Malay/regional tamarind, and Western brandy, among other ingredients, and is called by a Malay name. The confluence of distinct cultural elements in Peranakan cuisine is also found in Singlish and, subsequently, in artworks that dare to use Singlish.

A doctor-musician, Jipson Quah wrote a review that was published on Singapore Medical Association News. Quah provided a paraphrased synopsis with his impressions in comments such as “(a) tad lame, but still plausible in Singapore. Remember Chicken Rice War?”²¹ (Quah 2013:50-51). Echoing my initial fear that the subject-matter lent itself to ridicule. But even that is totally legitimate, since it is meant to be a light-hearted work. Through his review, it was clear that the overarching narrative of conflict-and-resolution was successfully conveyed through the performance: “(t)hey bicker to the point of no return before they both miraculously see the error of their ways. A husband-and-wife compromise!” (Quah 2013:51) Like most Singaporeans who are food-lovers, Quah waxed lyrical about the gastronomical experience, praising the *laksa* served during the intermission (see Fig. 3). As a medical doctor, he supplied the obligatory medical and health concerns of eating *laksa* and instant noodles.

²⁰ Next to the Victoria Concert Hall, the Arts House is a performing arts venue in a centralized downtown location, ideal for chamber-sized performances. Formerly known as the “Old Parliament House”, it is the oldest government building, dating back to the colonial era.

²¹ Chicken Rice War probably refers to the local movie of the same title, about the competition between two rival hawkers with a Romeo and Juliette inspired storyline.

Overall, it was a friendly and encouraging review as he had called it a “marvellous gastro-musical adventure” that “Song and his team have done Singaporean cuisine and music justice” (Quah 2013:51).



Figure 3: Prima Taste Serving *laksa* at Arts House (Photo credit: Chang Tou Liang)

Another medical-doctor musician, the senior music critic in town Dr. Chang Tou Liang also reviewed the premiere of “Laksa Cantata”. He published his thoughts on his blog as well as in one of the national newspapers, *The Straits Times*, titled “More Local Flavor Needed” (Chang 2013). The excerpt relating to “Laksa Cantata” is reproduced here:

(. . .) Soprano Rebecca Li was the feisty and sharp-tongued Leah, antagonist of dreamy and self-indulgent Stephen, sung by Symphony 92.4 [classical music radio station] deejay Kiat Goh, whose craving is a steaming bowl of laksa. Chen chose a completely Western idiom for this setting, such that Leah’s *Scorned Woman Aria* sounded like a Bernstein-esque showpiece, full of syncopations and twists which Li negotiated with much ease. For Stephen’s *Laksa Aria*, the inspiration was Benjamin Britten in his more melodious moments, and Goh nailed the words with gusto. And there were titters when he sang, “The flawless complexion of the white

bee hoon, wavering in a sea of coconut cream, the *tau pok* and *hae* only makes me swoon.”

Together, their duet *Agree To Disagree*, had another harmonious serving of colloquialisms. “Some say no *harm*²², like the laksa of Katong²³. Others have no qualm, but they serve no *sotong*,” goes another line. With the threat of ma-in-law coming over to stay, the couple settle their differences (no laksa for a day), closing peaceably with a blissful duet that opens, “A new bowl is a new day”.

This enjoyable exercise would have been a greater coup had Chen had mustered a Peranakan or local idiom to spice up the work. Perhaps a detailed study of *dondang sayang* and related musical traditions, and the liberal use of baba and nyonya patois might yield a more authentic second version of the cantata in the near future. . . . (Chang 2013)

Chang noted our “western idiom” through the perceived stylistic influences of Bernstein and Britten. He even gave suggestions to improve the initial version of the “Laksa Cantata” that, according to him, lacked “local flavor”. So here, in the context of music composed as an homage to an iconic Singaporean food, it seems that once offered, references to Singaporeanness are fulfilling and, like laksa, more is desired.²⁴

The unanimous critique of our own creative and production teams was that there was too much unaccompanied dialogue in the first version of the Cantata. For the 2018 production of “A Singapore Trilogy”, Jack updated the dialogues and I revised the score accordingly to recontextualize and musically represent the “melodious” Singaporean dialogues between the two characters. In essence, we turned the original spoken dialogues into *recitatives* that flexibly traversed the spectrum of the spoken voice – a kind of Singaporean *sprechstimme* – and fully-sung vocalizations. We on creative and production teams felt that the revisions distinctly improved the work, directing a stronger flow in musico-dramatic narrative connections. In reviewing the 2018 production of “Laksa Cantata” performed by soprano Ng Jingyun and tenor Samuel Ng, Chang’s highly positive review, titled “Realising the Dream of Singaporean Opera” (Chang 2018) bore no further complaints of any lack of local essence.

²² “Harm” is a pun with “hum” (or “see hum”), Cantonese for “cockles” - a kind of shellfish that is an optional ingredient of *laksa*.

²³ *Katong* is an area in eastern part of Singapore where the famed *Katong Laksa* is located.

²⁴ On hindsight, it would indeed be interesting to explore the possibilities of the musical references to *dondang sayang* and the speech-patterns and idiosyncrasies of the peranakan patois.

Incorporating the Vernacular – Singing in Singlish

In 2018, Jonathan Shin wrote another iteration of his paper on Singlish and Singaporean musical performance. The new version of this essay was titled “Setting a Creole to Music: Singlish from the Streets to the Stage through Chen Zhangyi’s “Laksa Cantata””. In it he argues that Singlish is the answer to the perennial question of the existence of Singaporean sound and music. Through detailed analysis of “Laksa Cantata”, Shin comes to the conclusion that to “dance the dance” of the challenge of setting music with consideration of the natural intonations of Singlish, is already a big step toward creating a Singaporean sound.

Our creative team’s approach in developing “Laksa Cantata” was to incorporate one of the most significant and identifiable aspects of Singaporean culture – the unmistakable (yet multivalent) Singlish, a colloquial variant form of English. To be consistent with the food analogies, Singlish, with its colorful tonal qualities, is very much like another Singaporean dish *rojak*.²⁵ Considering the possibilities of borrowed words from Malay, Tamil and different Chinese dialects, the actual sound of Singlish may vary from speaker to speaker, rather significantly depending on the various factors of culture orientation, demographics as well as the level of formality.

To furnish a simple overview on the complex dynamics of Singlish, we may imagine a visualization with three axes using three linguistic models to place a particular variant of Singlish, with the understanding that there are more nuances and subtlety to it. On the horizontal axis, we could tentatively attribute the general Singaporean cultural orientations (Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other): a Singaporean Malay, or Singaporean Indian’s Singlish would be slightly different than a Singaporean Chinese (the form with which I identify). The vertical axis could be set as the controversial diglossia²⁶ (Wee 2018:169-176) of the “high” Standard Singapore English versus the “low” Colloquial Singapore English, dependent on the varying degrees of formality or colloquial-ness and further implications of social class. The depth axis could be used to chart the generational differences: ranging from a teenage Gen Z’s Singlish that might be peppered with

²⁵ A mixed salad of fruits, fried fritters and other ingredients extending the metaphor. There are also multiple versions of *rojak*.

²⁶ It should be noted that in his overall argument, ‘diglossia,’ ‘creolistics,’ and ‘three circles’ are all rejected here by Wee for being too static as models to define Singlish.

contemporary youth slang, to the Gen X and Boomers' Singlish generations which is peppered with borrowings from the various dialects (Lee 2015:10). Within these cultural, demographic, and formality factors, Singlish may range from the "higher" end of Acrolect (standard) with a mere hint of an accent, to the commonly spoken Mesolect Singlish, to the "lower" end of Basilect Singlish that embraces a liberal dose of borrowed words. The following chart (see Fig. 4) illustrates an example of my own spoken Singlish as a Gen Y Singaporean-Chinese assuming an average value of 5 on the vertical axis of formality of 0-10 (where 10 is the most formal, 0 is the most colloquial).

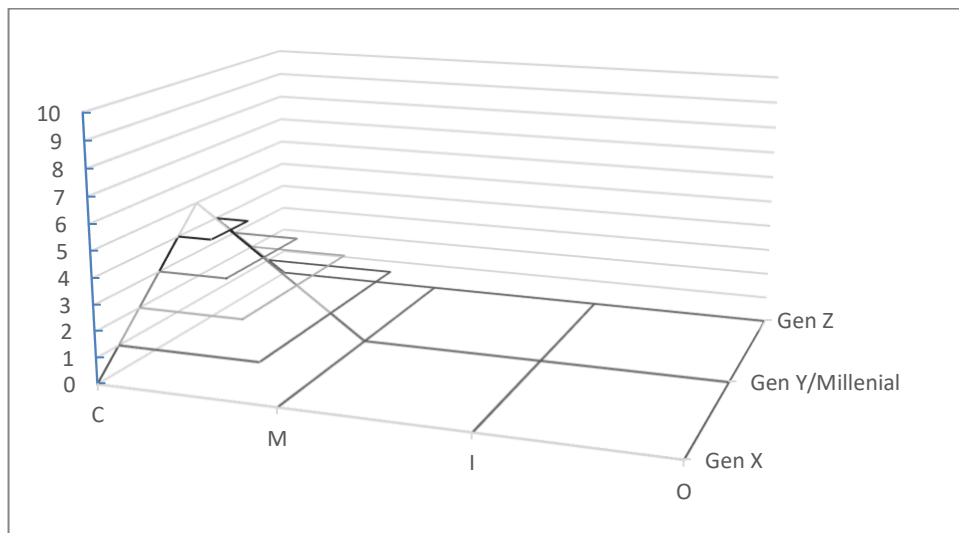


Figure 4: A simple visualization of Singlish variants

The Singlish-inflected *recitatives* in “Laksa Cantata” may be more or less placed at a similar spot, where monologues and dialogues happen between a Singaporean couple, whereas in Leah’s aria, it is more inclined toward Standard Singapore English. The most colorful colloquialisms may be found in Stephen’s recitatives and his *Laksa Aria*, in which he names all the obligatory *laksa* ingredients (see Fig. 1). Socio-linguist Lionel Wee explains that “Singlish is a part of a complex involving culture and identity that is persistently changing as a result of globalization” (Wee 2018:171). Beyond the rather straightforward visualization

that I have provided above (see Fig. 4), Wee (2018:173-176) argues for more dynamic models that take into consideration migration, demography, culture orientation, and affinity, and the inclusion of indexicality and semiotic signs to define Singlish. Underlying the complex phenomenon of Singlish, I believe (although I cannot prove) that there is a common ground where all versions of Singlish intersect. It may be precisely at these overlapping spaces where the collective Singaporean sound can be heard to resonate the most.

Related to the issue of the Singlish controversy is the diminishing presence of Chinese dialects. The success of the governmental schemes such as the “Speak Good Mandarin” and “Speak Good English” campaigns have regrettably caused the decline of Chinese dialects to the extent where most people in my generation and after, have minimal contact with the dialects and often cannot converse fluently in what used to be the languages of our parents’ dialect groups (Lee 2015: 6-7).²⁷ In an attempt to salvage the situation through the media, there has been a recent resurgence of select TV programmes in the Chinese dialects. Arguably, the limited vocabulary of dialect words that remain familiar to the younger generations of Singaporean-Chinese are mere remnants, surviving through borrowed words found in some variants of Singlish.

The prevalence and popularity of Singlish has never diminished even after official statements and government-led movements systematically discouraged the use of Singlish (Au-Yong 2016). The government’s attempt to discourage the use of Singlish stems from the concern that when Singaporeans speak a “wrong” form of English, our international counterparts will not understand us. The obvious argument against this is that the ability to code-switch along the diglossial continuum appropriately, depending on the scenario of conversation demonstrates true linguistic facility that allows Singaporeans to identify and belong to many different groups in the world, while maintaining a strong Singaporean identity – imagine the situation of buying Fishball Noodles at a *kopitiam* versus the formal context of speaking to a potential employer at a job interview. The

²⁷ It is not uncommon for Singaporeans of my parents’ generation (Baby Boomers) to be able to converse in their own mother tongues (Mandarin, Malay, Tamil), in their one or more Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese etc.), the national language of Malay, as well as English (to varying degrees). Depending on the school systems that they have access to, their fluency in the official Mother Tongue and English levels may differ. For the younger generations of Singaporean-Chinese, English is the primary language of communication, the mother-tongue fluency is generally not strong, not to mention abilities to converse in dialects.

counterargument notes the fact that not every Singaporean can switch tracks comfortably or proficiently.²⁸ Outlined, and to a degree foretold, in Geertz's fourth phase of Nationalism (Geertz 1973:241), we can track Singapore's experience as it confronted a young state's choice of national language. Although it had long been a multi-lingual society, Singapore had officially adopted Malay and English as the national languages for ideological reasons when, prior to independence in 1965, its goal was to participate as a fully fledged member of the Malayan Federation. Through the 1950s and especially after independence, Singapore privileged English as the language for communication between ethnic groups on the island, while urging all students to study two languages in both primary and then secondary school. The goal was to cultivate a shared national language while sustaining the multi-cultural diversity of the islands mixed populations. But the traditions of speaking to one another across linguistic boundaries, the very processes that generated the collection of communication levels that ultimately formed the basis of Singlish could not be erased by government policies regarding speaking good English or Tamil or Chinese. Rather, the linguistic mixtures continued to develop. The current burgeoning interest in the study of Singlish (Yuen 2017) provides some evidence that the creole has developed and flourished amongst the Singaporeans at large, despite governmental policies. Its flexibility and congenial efficiency in everyday informal communication amongst Singaporeans, perhaps to the dismay of policymakers, allows Singlish to serve as a unique form of intangible cultural heritage common to all Singaporeans.

In setting Singlish to music, the distinct elements of syntax, vocabulary and accent must be considered. It is definitely the Singaporean accent that gives color to the words and syllabic emphasis. Even if we chose to speak in Standard English in terms of vocabulary and grammatical syntax, the vernacular accent could still be present in performed speech. At the conception stage of "Laksa Cantata", I sent an email summarizing a discussion between Jack, Ziliang, and myself, dated January 6, 2012.

²⁸ Perhaps successful code-switching is something that aligns with particular class boundaries?

Discussion about Cantata.

Cast

Rebecca Li – Soprano (based in Singapore)

Can be mother or Daughter.

Daniel Pius Fong – Baritone (based in RAM, London)

Can be Father or son.

Narrator – Christine Octaviani?

General plans

- Coffee Cantata-remake.

- “Laksa Cantata”, based on Bach's Coffee Cantata, with regard to contemporary Singapore culture.

Language

- Local-flavored English, not necessarily Singlish *per se*.

- 80% ‘good’ English

Although the plans for the cast had changed somewhat (notably removing the role of a narrator), it was interesting to note our agreement to 80% good English and 20% – a ratio we determined would make the text intelligible to non-Singaporeans while still maintaining a local flavor through characteristic Singlish words (20%) all while maintaining a Singlish accent in the recitatives.

In setting music to a creole, the Singaporean “classical” music scene may be considered a late comer in relation to the lively local theatre scene, Singlish has appeared on stages for decades in plays and through poetry. In my attempt to capture the intonation of the speech patterns in Singlish, I provide the following descriptive direction in the score (see Fig. 5) for an excerpt of recitative dialogue: “without measures; with a natural Singlish accent”. The recitative-like dialogue involves a smattering of familiar Singlish expressions with vocabulary borrowed from Malay such as “suka suka” and “makan”, as well as ending such as “lah” and “ar” to subtly modify the tone and meaning of informal speech.²⁹

²⁹ “*suka suka*” – a reduplicated Malay word which can be translated to “as you like it”. In this case, it is similar in meaning to “anyhow”, as in “without a whim”; “*makan*” refers to “to eat” or “eating”; “ar” – borrowed from Mandarin, the use of “ar” (or “ah”, with a rising tone) marks the end of a question.

RECITATIVE B

Senza Misura; with natural Singlish accent

176

Violin *pizz.*
f colla voce sempre

Clarinet in A *colla voce sempre*

Leah (Soprano) *mf assertively* (points finger)
We need to make de - ci - sions to - ge - ther, you can - not a - ny - how su - ka su - ka!

177

Vln. *f* *arco*

Cl. in A *f* *mf*

L.

St. *mf* baffled, but passionately (half speaking) (sung)
why ah? you don't seem... (m) to be in - te - rest - ed in food! or

178

Vln. *pizz.* *arco*
mf *p dolce*

Cl. in A *mp* *mf* *p* *p dolce*

L.

St. *sub. mp espress.*
a - ny of our ma - kan pla - ces that I like

Figure 5: Recitative B from “Laksa Cantata” (m. 176-178)

Jonathan Shin has commented that the notation of this updated passage is an almost scientific manner of notating the intonation of Singlish, to an extent that resembles the exacting bird-song notation of Messiaen. In fact, through my musical studies of the western musical canon, I was inspired by the *sprechstimme*-sung spectrum of Schoenberg and Berg. In the recitative above (Fig. 5) and in similar passages, a different spectrum of tone palette is explored through the inherent intonation and color of our vernacular Singlish. Through playing with a vocal framework of Singaporean-accented voices traversing speech, half-spoken and fully sung states, “*Laksa Cantata*” achieves a Singlish-inflected musical language. The presence of English as a part of that mix also allows Singlish and Singlish-inflected music to be at least partially understood by audiences beyond our shores. However, it is unlikely that a performer who is unfamiliar with the Singlish accent could recreate it by simply following what the score instructs. Therein lies the element of interpretation, in effect, a way to transform the notated score to performed realization. To date, only Singaporean singers have performed “*Laksa Cantata*”, and they were cast based on their ability to ensure nuanced renditions of the Singaporean accent. Does this imply that only performers who are Singaporean, or singers who are well-acquainted to the Singlish accent, can deliver a Singaporean performance of this work?

Richard Taruskin (1995:78-81) has argued against the “authenticity” movement in music performance in which early music performers were plagued by the futile obsession to recreate “authentic” performances that were actually made up of unknowable remnants from the past. Instead, he urges performers to seek an “authenticity that matters.” Another approach to this problem is presented by Allan Moore (2002:210) who argues that authenticity is an ascriptive process and our understanding of the idea necessarily depends on *who* is being authenticated. Within popular music discourse, one that may extend to other musical contexts, Moore suggests that in the quest for authenticity, “[t]hree types of response are possible, according to whether it is the performer herself, the performer’s audience, or an (absent) other who is being authenticated.” (Moore 2002:220). This notion of perceived authenticity runs deep in Singaporean music, as demonstrated in Yassar Mattar’s research exploring why Singaporean Pop music in English is perceived as inferior to pop music from Western countries in the same language. Although he explored the problem in an inverted form, Mattar (2009:180) documented that the music of local singers who performed with a Singaporean accent or who lacked in international Western accent, was perceived

to be of a lower “quality” and, surprisingly, also less “authentic”. Thus, making it clear, why Singaporean pop musicians were not successful either in the box office or in the market – They were neither fish nor fowl, neither Western but also not Singaporean enough.

With the “Laksa Cantata” based on local cuisine and with text inspired primarily by the intonation of Singlish, we determined that a Singaporean accent might be in fact a desired quality for performers of our cantata. As composer, I would also argue that a performance without Singaporean accents would be equally viable if the performers pay close attention to the details, commit to their roles, and deliver a convincing performance. It would be interesting to hear alternative approaches to performing “Laksa Cantata”. Ironically, if we move beyond the necessity of casting Singaporean performers in “Laksa Cantata”, the essence of the musical material may very well emerge. I will revisit this inflectional issue of accents later in this essay after discussing the performance considerations for the other two chamber operas that make up my trilogy: “Window Shopping” and “Kopi For One”.

PART II: “Window Shopping” (2014)

Anecdote #2: Origins of a monodrama

In 2013, there was a call for scores from *Chamber.Sounds*, a Singapore initiative formed by a group of young local musicians and composers³⁰. They are dedicated to commissioning and promoting new music from the Asia-Pacific region for chamber-sized ensembles, thus the name. For this particular project, they selected and programmed a few chamber operas.

At this time, I had just experienced the premiere of Michael Hersch’s *On the Threshold of Winter*, a monodrama in two acts that featured soprano Ah Young Hong. For Hersch, it was a work composed during one of the darkest times of his life; as he was dealing with a close friend’s death through cancer and overcoming his own suffering. In the programme notes (Farach-Colton 2014), Hersch’s

³⁰ The Chamber•Sounds collective is largely made up of graduates from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFTA). They gave their first concert in 2011 and remained relatively active until 2017.

classification of his work as a monodrama was discussed in reference to other works from the repertoire with a single singer.

“Because there is only one singing role – like Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*, Poulenc’s *La voix humaine* and Peter Maxwell Davies’ *Eight Songs for a Mad King* – Hersch describes his work as a monodrama. This categorization is entirely correct, though there is a crucial difference: In the three other works, the singer is communicating with other characters, real or imaginary, though unseen. Hersch gives us a true soliloquy; if his singer is addressing anyone at all, it is us.” (Farach-Colton 2014),

The intensity of this soliloquy and the singularity of the lone voice had a quality that resonated with me. As a former student of Hersch, he had said to me once that this opera was written without any commission or fixed performance date – he just *had* to write it. The most memorable detail of his conversations with me regarding this work was his intense clarity of the vision of how the music should sound and the visual details of the female character’s appearance.

I was awed by the expressive capabilities of a single human voice joined with a few instruments and was inspired to create my own chamber opera featuring a female voice. The chamber opera “Window Shopping” is the work that emerged. Initially, I thought that it should be a monodrama about a woman walking into a shoe shop, looking forward to the future steps, while lamenting the past. I called Jack, once again, and told him about my idea of taking the popular Singaporean pastime of shopping as the idea for a new chamber opera. After some discussion about the basic narrative and the dramatic possibilities, we settled on ‘two’ female characters, with the dramatic twist that they can be perceived as, likely are, the same person (albeit a decade apart) – perhaps an older woman is reflecting upon her youthful folly or perhaps a younger woman unaware that she confronts future self.

Our intention at that point was to group the “Laksa Cantata”, this new *Shopping* opera and an earlier work *April Showers Bring May Flowers* (Chen 2010)³¹ together as a trilogy. We submitted our proposal for the *Chamber.Sounds* call and waited. Positive news from *Chamber.Sounds* followed soon after. Jack and I now had a few months to write the libretto and the music. After the score was completed, the girl’s role was given to young Singaporean soprano Cherie Tse. During casting, *Chamber.Sounds* asked me to reduce the work to a

³¹ *April Showers, Bring May Flowers* (2010) was written in collaboration with librettist Elizabeth Dow, as part of Peabody Institute’s Opera Études programme.

monodrama when they could not secure a singer for the other role, an idea that I quickly declined. Eventually, the vacant role of the woman was filled by the dynamic Japanese American soprano based in Singapore, Akiko Otao. This casting arrangement turned out to be rather apt. Cherie was the youthful female performer, brimming with enthusiasm and potential but without much experience (at that point),³² while Akiko had at least a decade experience of performing professionally and internationally. Unbeknownst to us at that time, Akiko would become an important figure in the production of our trilogy of chamber operas over the following years.

But the Japaneseness of Akiko Otao was present. We were forced to ask the essentializing question, could she actually sing the role of a Singaporean woman. If we contemplate upon the idea of a Singaporean performer, as with many other matters in Singapore, the international is blended, almost seamlessly into the local. It certainly is the case for Otao, as her years of residency in Singapore continue, her familiarity with Singaporea, even her “Singaporeanness” as well as her continued contribution to the local arts scene becomes more apparent and important. Akiko Otao co-founded *L’arietta Productions*, a Singaporean chamber opera company solely dedicated to performing new chamber opera works. It was *L’arietta* that made the full premiere production of our “A Singapore Trilogy” possible.

“Window Shopping” – Characters³³

WOMAN – soprano (or mezzo-soprano), in her early thirties

GIRL – soprano, in her early twenties

³² There was even a point during the rehearsal period when Cherie wanted to drop out of the role, perhaps due to the pressures of juggling her studies and the rehearsal schedule. She was eventually convinced (by Akiko) to stay on track and debuted as the Girl quite successfully.

³³ In the earlier versions of the libretto (up to January 2014), the two characters have been named “Older Woman” and “Younger Lady” or “Younger Woman”, which were somehow reflected in *L’arietta*’s poster of “Honestly” as late as 2016. However, in the music scores I have used “Woman” and “Girl” in the 2014 *Chamber.Sounds* version. This minor but meaningful change suggested by our friend and theatre consultant Nora Samosir, elegantly conveys the different stages of life that each character represents.

Instrumentation³⁴: flute, clarinet (in B♭), violin, violoncello and piano

Synopsis

At a boutique shoe shop set in the present day, the scene begins with a woman in her thirties wandering into the shop (*Prelude*). She takes her time to browse through the shop with a sense of nostalgia and reminisces on her visit to the same store many years ago, perhaps in a kind of *déjà vu*. Each pair of heels in the shoe boutique reminds her of her past, and she laments to herself about time passed (“A Woman’s Lament”). While she immersed in her memories of youthful folly, a girl enters the shop. Full of excitement she announces that it is “Time to Shop!” while the Woman continues to sing with regret in the background. As if on a shopping spree, the Girl portrays the stereotype (both international but also especially Singaporean) of a carefree shopaholic in *Shopping Aria*.

The woman and the girl seem to be unaware of each other’s presence, as they browse through the shop, and eventually both arrive at a blue pair of shoes. This special pair of heels has both women transfixed; one is teeming with excitement, and the other is simply overwhelmed by memories. The Woman expresses her regrets about her past, where “Every sole [soul] has a story [...] but they are always blinded by the ground” while the Girl looks forward to a wonderful future ahead where “each sole [soul] has a new story to tell!”

As the opera ends (*Ending*), they reflect to and through one another with simultaneously spoken lines. The woman laments about her past in self-reflection while the girl looks forward to her unknown, but certain to be bright, future. It is left open whether they are simply two different characters or the same person separated through time. The audience must decide for themselves. The opera concludes open-endedly, but without either character making any purchase.

³⁴ The piano-vocal edition may also be performed if the full “Pierrot” ensemble is not available, as in the 2016 *L’arietta* production.

Self-Reflection and Color in “Window Shopping”

Depending on the casting, the vocal timbre and visual appearances of two singers may blend together as if they were one person or they may vary dramatically. The special pair of blue shoes in shoe shop serves as a mirror of sorts, used to reflect the personalities, or the two women, a process that is completed by costumes, staging, and most critically, their disparate musical materials, which are in turn enhanced by the subtle differences of tone color in their voices. In response to the premiere performance of the opera, one reviewer made a comment that the pair of soprano voices was too similar:

“[...] The narrative juxtaposed two differing attitudes of a woman shopping for shoes, the more contemplative and mature version of her was contrasted with the younger, feistier self. [...] Maybe because of the similar vocal ranges of both characters, it was difficult to make out their singing. It might have worked better if a character was an alto instead of both being sopranos.” (Ng 2014)

The intended vocal results of inter-twining two similar female voice types was observed by Ng as a potential flaw. However, as the composer, I can confirm that this merging of voices and voice types was intentional. If the two women are understood to be separated by a decade, then it makes perfect sonic and dramatic sense. If we take into account the physical reality of vocal timbres maturing through age, the voice of a soprano in her youth may very well age into a mellower tone color. I built the sonic narrative of “Window Shopping” upon the expectation of similarity of vocal timbre: a pair of soprano voices that are subtly distinct, possibly the same. An alternative possibility for voicing could be a soprano for the girl and a mezzo-soprano for the woman but then the work done by the similarity of vocal timbre has to be carried by other aspects of the performance.

The various combinations of soprano voice types heard in different performances of “Window Shopping” have produced a variety of viable results. Reviewing the performance history of “Window Shopping”, the casting combination of two sopranos is the most common (see Fig. 6).

Year	Girl	Woman	Location	Ensemble/Organization
2014	Cherie Tse (SGP)	Akiko Otao (JP/USA/SIN)	Singapore	Chamber.Sounds

2015	Chloe Lam (HK)	Stefanie Quintin (PH) Angela	Hong Kong	Hong Kong New Music Ensemble
2016	Akiko Otao (JP/USA/SIN)	Hodgins (USA) Angela	Singapore	L'arietta (piano)
2016	Akiko Otao (JP/USA/SIN)	Hodgins (USA) Angela	Singapore	L'arietta (piano)
2016	Akiko Otao (JP/USA/SIN)	Hodgins (USA)	Singapore	L'arietta (piano)
2018	Phoebe Chee (SGP)	Felicia Teo (MY/SIN)	Singapore	L'arietta, A Singapore Trilogy
2019	Pauline Arejola (PH)	Stefanie Quintin (PH)	Phillipines	Ensemble Ripieno, PH
2020	Akiko Otao (JP/USA/SIN)	Akiko Otao (JP/USA/SIN)	Singapore	L'arietta, Studio Recording
2020	Phoebe Chee (SGP)	NA	Singapore	L'arietta, Short Film (piano)

Figure 6: List of “Window Shopping” casts (2014-2020)

The pair Akiko Otao and Angela Hodgins³⁵ championed the work through *L'arietta*'s first production entitled “Honestly! Three operas, One hour” (see Fig. 7). They went on to perform it through the National Arts Council's “Arts In Your

³⁵ Initially, I had dedicated the “Window Shopping” to Ah Young Hong out of admiration, but later rededicated it to Akiko Otao and Angela Hodgins.

Neighborhood”³⁶ initiative during the 2016 season. Switching roles, Akiko had decided to take the part of the youthful girl; Angela Hodgins, on the other hand, is the only mezzo-soprano who has sung the role of woman. In a review of this production (Tay 2016), the local affinity of the subject matter is duly noted along with an insightful analysis of the duo’s performance, effectively summing up the perceived musical attributes of the seemingly contrasting characters and several possible readings of the narrative:

“Window-shopping is a subject matter that resonates with Singaporeans-at-large. Ably performed by Angela Hodgins (mezzo-soprano) and Akiko Otao (soprano) the darker, brooding music of the older protagonist as sung by Hodgins was well-contrasted by a more upbeat, lively music brought to life by the bubbly performance of Akiko. The final juxtaposition of musical ideas that represent the two protagonists made for a very interesting fare for the ear. The two women never interacted nor addressed each other directly but eventually ended up moving their scarves in exactly the same manner at the very end. Are the two women really one and the same person? Schizophrenia? Future self-lamenting the consequence of one’s choices on hindsight? Regardless, this is certainly one opera that deserves a second (or third) hearing!” (Tay 2016)

In the 2020 studio recording of “Window Shopping”, the self-reflection noted in the review above was enhanced. Akiko Otao was engaged to record both roles in a multi-track recording process. Vocally, Akiko made a conscious decision to mold her voices differently while recording the two different role. This performance comes close to the original intent of “Window Shopping” in which the woman and the girl are indeed the same character. Thus, the studio recording creates an ideal audio version of “Window Shopping”, overcoming the acoustic impossibilities of a live show.

³⁶ The “Arts In Your Neighbourhood” performances included two locations in Singapore: the first at The Plaza of the Mapletree Business City, and the second was set up next to the MRT train station at Bendemeer Mall. The latter had a make-shift stage resembling the *getai*, truly bringing arts to the people.

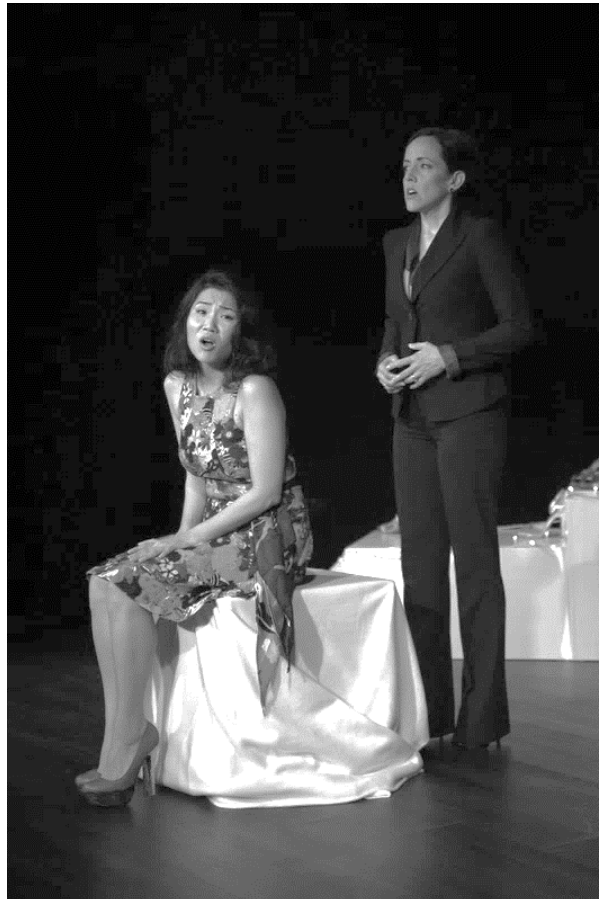


Figure 7: Akiko Otao and Angela Hodgins in *L'arietta's* “Honestly!” production³⁷
(Photo credit: *L'arietta Productions*)

Eclecticism and Layered Time

In “Window Shopping”, there is an intentional juxtaposition and layering of a variety of musical references. This was a way for us to navigate and explore of the perspectives of time, a challenge that is apparent in deciding upon a time

³⁷ Held at 10 Square, a black box theatre within Orchard Central mall.

interval of about a decade between the two characters, who may be the same person (depending on staging decisions). It ranges from the woman’s music being influenced by Baroque forms and impressionist textures, while the girl’s music being infused with jazz, musical theater and pop references. There is an underlying adherence to chronology of the referenced musical styles. The woman’s musical materials generally allude to older styles, while those of the girl reference more recent musical trends. This is true, despite the fact that their narrative realities and temporal zones unfold in reverse order. That is, the older woman of the present appears first, whereas the young girl (possibly a reflection of the past) appears later at about halfway through the twenty-minute work.

Bar no.:	75	178 192	234 255	281	289 (322-332)	380	453-490	
Title:	I. Prelude	II. A Woman's Lament	III. Time to Shop!	'It's a shopping adventure'	'now all that's left, is despair'	IV. Shopping Aria	V. Intermezzo VI. Ending	
Character:	Woman - - - Woman - - - - -	Girl - - - - - Woman	Girl - - - - - Woman	Woman	Girl - - - - -	Girl Woman	Girl Woman	
Meter:	4 4	3 2	3 4	4 4	3 2	2 2	various 4 4	
Tempo:	♩ = 70	♩ = 56 (with fluctuations)	♩ = 56 (♩ = 168)	♩ = 112 (116, 120)	♩ = 56	♩ = 69 (♩ = 138) (♩ = 92)	♩ = 60 (♩ = 120) etc. ♩ = 69	
Marking:	Serene; with a hint of melancholy	Introspective; with a hint of regret	Capriccioso	Upbeat	with a hint of regret	Jazzy; Sassy (very slightly swung quavers)	(Melodramatic) Jazzy; Nostalgic	Ethereal
Influences and notes:	Impressionist (Ravel Trio)	Neo-baroque (Ground bass; variations) 'Ariadne's Love' quote 'Home' quote	Bernsteinesque 'I feel pretty' Lament-fragment (from m.137)	Pop Song	Lament- fragment	Jazz reference ABAB form (B Section)	Juxtaposition of previous fragments	Layered; spoken (Philip Glass)

Figure 8: A formal overview of “Window Shopping”

The opening of “Window Shopping” invokes the sonic quality of a quasi-French, nineteenth century style, perhaps an homage to Maurice Ravel’s “Trio” (see Fig. 9). In Ravel’s opening bars, the *modéré* tempo marking, the octave displacement, use of pedal, and parallel voice leading are some of the elements I have borrowed. My intention was to recreate a “soundtrack” that was fitting to a high-end shoe boutique as the Woman entered, quietly referencing the world of Parisian *haute couture*.

VIOLON. *Modéré*

VIOLONCELLE. *Modéré* ♩ = 132

PIANO. *pp*

Figure 9: Ravel's "Trio" for violin, violoncello and piano, I (mm. 1-4)

In "Window Shopping", the opening *Prelude*, sung by the woman, is marked "Serene; with a hint of melancholy" (see Fig. 10). After ten bars of introduction by the *Pierrot* ensemble,³⁸ the woman appears, her voice entering seamlessly as if emerging from the transparent veil of instrumental sound. As she sings, the music gradually intensifies with interwoven woodwind lines and gently pulsating string textures reaching restrained emotional peaks at the words "far too many" (m. 33) and "we keep searching" (m. 56), each time recalling an understated nostalgia for the "perfect pair". She is torn between the "wondrous" (mm. 42-43) joys of owning too many pairs of the "dangerously high...murderous" (mm. 63-65) stilettos and bitter regrets for her past indulgence.

4 Serene; with a hint of melancholy
4 ♩ = 70

Piano *p dolcissimo*

Lib. ad lib.
(una corda)

Figure 10: "Window Shopping", *Prelude* (mm. 1-4)

³⁸ An instrumental configuration of flute, clarinet, violin, violoncello, piano and voice(s) that was established after Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire".

A purely instrumental passage transitions³⁹ into her next aria, “A Woman’s Lament”. The choice to reference Purcell’s “Dido’s Lament” is a hint about the older age of the woman. Despite the fact that Dido was a young queen, the chromatically descending *lamento* motive and the ponderous tempo of the recurring ground bass serves to characterize the woman’s depth of life experiences and darker emotional trajectory. Through a rough retrograde-inversion of the familiar Purcell ground (see Fig. 11), I have derived a new bass line in which the chromatic descent is placed at the end of the ground (see Fig. 12). With each iteration of the repeating ground bass, the music above is varied in a quasi-baroque manner where rhythmic, textural and harmonic details vary in response to the text. The woman’s text echoes the *lamento* tradition with an obsession over loss and thoughts of mortality in phrases such as “every sole inevitably fades with time” (mm. 91-95) and “trapped I am in this vicious cycle, is it now Death transpiring this constant repetition...” (mm.157-164). The friction created through the repetitive nature of the ground as a musical device and the pun of the physical surface on which this pair of shoes come in contact with, serves to connect the metaphorical and literal basis for the choice of the *lamento* ground in an opera about shoes.



Figure 11: Ground from “Dido’s Lament” (Purcell)

Figure 12: – “Window Shopping”, A Woman’s Lament (mm. 75-82)

³⁹ This is achieved harmonically with common tones. Chord tones Db and Gb of the previous Gb9 chord, held over enharmonically into F# and C# of a D maj.7 chord.

Beyond the homages to Ravel and Purcell, I have indulged in a self-quotation from the choral-orchestral work “Ariadne’s Love” (mentioned in anecdote #1). The woman’s line “(t)hose first blue heels, began my plight” (mm. 117, see Fig. 13) is set to the melodic fragment of “Ariadne’s Love” in a ponderous 4/2 marked “With Nostalgia” ($\text{♩} = 42$). The *lamento* trope can be further drawn between the woman’s dejection and Ariadne’s abandonment, where Theseus left her on the island of Naxos, choosing duty over love. As Ariadne laments her plight in Monteverdi’s “Lasciatemi Morire”, the Woman laments her own life and regrets her past.



Figure 13: “Window Shopping” (mm. 117-120), quotation of “Ariadne’s Love”

A musical quote with a Singaporean source, the melody of Dick Lee’s “Home”⁴⁰ (1998) – a successful National Day Song sung by Kit Chan – is woven into the text, “...in this metropolis I called home, filled with purpose and delight”. The “Home” quote, from the chorus, “This is home, truly, where I know I must be...” is (perhaps too well) hidden, as it is only melodically referenced in the flute part (see Fig. 14). Here the woman emerges from the “Ariadne” reference and the use of past tense (rather than the present tense of the original) implies that the city is no longer home, highlighting an emotional void created by an unknown (to the audience) source: perhaps migration or the loss of her loved one(s).⁴¹ Often a source of controversy, National Day Songs created through governmental initiatives may be what Tan Shzr Ee (2005:95) refers to as “fakesong” (what I understand to be her pun to “folksong”), criticizing the government’s efforts to create a body of patriotic songs. However, it is noted that “Home” is different from the bulk of these once-a-year produced songs. It belongs to a more refined

⁴⁰ Neil Chan and other authors in this volume comment on the social phenomenon of National Day Songs and the National Day Parades, a topic clearly worth separate debates and further discussion.

⁴¹ An implication of the woman’s migration definitely resonated within me, as I was at that time a graduate student in Baltimore who had been long away from home.

type of Singaporean song, those that are not overtly nationalistic. It embraces family and the home environment through the endearing mention of the (Singapore) “river”. Its relatively high production value made it immensely popular and readily consumed by Singaporeans (Tan 2005:95).

The musical score for Figure 14 consists of three staves: Flute (Fl.), Violin (W.), and Piano (Pno.). The Flute part begins at measure 124 and features a melodic line with trills and triplets, marked with a tempo of $\text{A Tempo } \text{♩} = 56$ and a dynamic of *mp*. The Violin part starts at measure 125 and includes lyrics: "In the me - tro-po - lis I called home, filled with pur- pose and de- light, I en - vi - sioned a fu - ture". It also features triplets and is marked with a tempo of $\text{A Tempo } \text{♩} = 56$ and a dynamic of *mp*. The Piano part begins at measure 125 and provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and triplets, marked with a dynamic of *p* and the instruction "tre corde".

Figure 14: “Window Shopping”, *A Woman’s Lament* (mm.124-129), “Home” quotation

While the woman’s entrance music loosely reinterprets impressionist and baroque models and suggests an elegant restraint through its slower tempi, the girl’s exuberant and more upbeat music is inspired by relatively recent musical styles, through references to musical theatre, jazz, and pop. In the *Chamber.Sounds* premiere conducted by Clarence Tan and directed by Gabriel Pang, Cherie Tse (the girl) was staged as a mannequin who posed immobile for ten minutes before coming to life and announcing that it’s “Time to Shop!”, a number inspired by the youthful waltz-like of Bernstein’s “I Feel Pretty” from “West Side Story”. In poly-temporal counterpoint, the woman re-enters with her lament in the background, singing “Unbeknownst, were the torment and pain...” complete with her *lamento* ground bass. Their disparate, overlapping sonic temporal zones coincide, expressing the girl’s delight in 3/4 ($\text{♩} = 168$), while the music of the woman flows in a hypermeter of 9/4 ($\text{♩} = 56$) that sounds at the same speed of her lament previously in 3/2. (See Fig. 15)

Figure 15: “Window Shopping” (mm. 187-197), poly-tempo example

“It’s a shopping adventure” is a mix of Bubblegum, 80s and 90s Pop, with the girl’s unabashed materialistic impulses echoing Madonna’s iconic “Material Girl” (1984). Some of the pop elements employed here include catchy syncopated

rhythms, groovy, chomping chords (as in Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby"), the ubiquitous common time, and an upbeat tempo (bpm of 112-120). The girl's melody alternates between major and minor inflections, highlighting her capricious nature. Harmonically, the general descent in harmonic movement connects the girl's music with the ground of "A Woman's Lament", although the interlocking suspensions, upbeat tempo, and pop style create an entirely different atmosphere. As the girl sings about starting shopping wish-lists, the woman sings of her dire situation, trapped in a vicious cycle. As the girl gasps with comments such as "Oh My God! Look at this pair" and "All these choices, what to do?" the tempo increase with each turn of shopaholic frenzy. The song begins in B major/minor marked "Upbeat ($\downarrow = 112$)" to "Imperceptibly faster ($\downarrow = 116$)", and eventually "Another Notch Faster ($\downarrow = 120$)" in C major/minor, mimicking the quintessential half-step modulation pop of the 80s and 90s, used to provide slight variation and intensification as a way to counter plain repetition.

The girl's next number "Shopping Aria" ("With Every Paycheck I Get") is articulated with colorful chromaticism, a walking bass, and swing rhythm alluding to jazz idioms. The lively tempo ($\downarrow = 138$) of the A section is contrasted with the B section "When I am down and sad" in a deliberately slower tempo ($\downarrow = 92$). It further characterizes the frivolous melodrama of the girl, where string and wind *glissandi* seem to mock the feigned seriousness of the chromatic inflections. In an ABAB form, the music does not slow down in the second B section, keeping the brisk tempo until the end.

In the Intermezzo, fragments of previous material from both characters are juxtaposed and overlapped in a postmodern, *arioso*-esque texture. The woman's elegance and relative sophistication is reflected through the slower tempi, in contrast to the girl's energetic excitement and shopaholic vanity characterized by faster tempi. When both characters sing simultaneously, the temporal dissonance is achieved as the woman's longer values juxtapose the girl's shorter subdivisions, a super-imposed polymetric relationship. In Fig. 16, the woman sings her *lament* while the musical texture is interrupted by ecstatic statements from the Girl in 3/8 meter.

The musical score consists of five staves. The top two staves are for Flute (Fl.) and Clarinet (Cl.). The middle two staves are for Violin (Vn.) and Viola (Vc.). The bottom staff is for the vocal line. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, dynamics (p, f), and articulation marks. The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

Lyrics:
 ne - vo - ris this shoe brings back. Ev - ly dance
 Is it e - ven my size?

Stage directions:
 (Extends hand out to reach for the shoe,
 older woman also tries to reach for the shoe but retracts her hand and turns away, the younger woman tries it.)

Figure 16: “Window Shopping”, an example of a “built-in” polymeter (mm. 402-406)

Philip Glass' "Knee Play" served as model in Jack's original conception for the "Ending" of "Window Shopping". Jack wrote to me:

"The final section-duet (with the older woman fading away) is all in dialogue with a continuous instrumental line (a la Glass in Einstein on the Beach). I suggest a theme and variation with two instruments. I would think that less piano in this whole work would be good, use the piano purely as a color for the work. I want the instrumental music to play a more pivotal role in this opera – the vocals is purely just so that there is story. Interesting concept? This way I feel the story becomes more dramatic" (Personal communication (email): Aug. 24, 2013)

In Glass' "Knee Play" from "Einstein on the Beach", two contrasting voices speak seemingly unrelated texts accompanied by a relentlessly moving violin. At the *Ending* of "Window Shopping", the woman and the girl cease singing, but they deliver lines that suggest disconnected dialogue as the woman responds disapprovingly to the girl's materialistic narcissism. The two characters deliver spoken lines above the music previously heard during the *Prelude*, with each line cued in and highlighted by the various instrumental strands of their own music. Discontinuous simultaneity, a non-linear presentation of the woman's and the girl's temporal and sonic zones is the aesthetic intent of the last scene.

At one point, the Girl's dilemma is expressed through her individual *accelerando* arriving at the quasi-Shakespearean question "to buy or not to buy" (see Fig. 17) eliciting a one-sided response from the Woman. Hanging on the resonance of a single inconclusive dominant note (F), the girl finally decides against the purchase. Instead, she offers a glimpse of maturity and revelation that "life is not about buying shoes, it's about the path that you take."

88
479

Fl. (pondering)

Cl. *mp*

Vln.

Vcl.

G. Accelerando (self-debating) (only for Girl) (Accel.) Ritardando (only for Girl) A Tempo (still pondering) (only for Girl)

...to buy or not to buy or not to buy or not to buy... Shall I buy it?

W. (Mysteriously walks away and fades away)

wake up? Win-dow shop-ping is like go-zing in-to a warped world trap'd in-side a glass box... Per-haps it's time to move on ... tomorrow

Pno. *mf*

(tre corde)

Figure 17: “Window Shopping”, layered spoken lines in *Ending* (mm. 479-483)

In a response to *L'arietta*'s production of “Window Shopping”, one reviewer (Lim 2016) picked up some of the various musical references and noted the effect of the differences between the two characters created by the musical materials,

libretto, staging, and costumes. The successful delivery of the nuances of the music and drama was in no small part due to the performances of the Otao/Hodgins duo – the contrast in the tone quality of their voices and their dramatic juxtaposition. The fact that it was only accompanied by a piano instead of the full ensemble might have brought even more attention to the voices.

“A quick set change and Chen Zhangyi’s chamber opera “Window Shopping” came on, with the stage transformed into a shoe boutique. By turns introspective and mercantile, the opera was a worthy vehicle for SOTA faculty Angela Hodgins as the thirty-something year old woman, whose attractive tone was put completely to the service of the text. The libretto by Jack Lin, offering several interesting insights like “Is there such a thing as a perfect pair (of shoes)” and play on words like wondrous/murderous, while entertaining, was sometimes a little ponderous in its profundity. The very likeable Akiko Otao, as the twenty-something year old, was perfect in her portrayal of mercantile vapidness – a little like Glinda from *Wicked* – thinking of her shoes as “a new lover for every season”. Costumes reflected the mood too, with Otao dressed in a flowery piece, while Hodgins was in an altogether more sombre pants-suit. In turns impressionistic and jazzy, Chen Zhangyi’s musical language was very approachable.” (Lim 2016)

What the reviewers of the different productions of “Window Shopping” did not necessarily recognize were the subtler, pop-culture allusions to Disney characters that demonstrated the globalized influences and potential ills of a cosmopolitan city. With the phrase “Fairy tale, left only hair a pair” (mm. 110-116), the woman’s hints at the moment when Cinderella loses her glass slipper on the steps. Here, the treble-heavy instrumentation that is marked “more fairytale-like” consists of a flute countermelody, string harmonics, and upper-range tinkling of the piano, aurally suggesting the frailty of the woman’s broken dreams. The girl’s harmonic-minor-infused “if only I had Ali baba’s lair” (mm. 306-307 and mm. 353-354) superficially references Princess Jasmine of the 1992 movie “*Aladdin*” inspired by *Arabian Nights*; secondly, it references the similarly named tech company Alibaba.com co-founded by Jack Ma, alluding to the divide between the upper classes of the elite, *nouveau riche* and the ever-aspiring middle and lower classes. While trying out a shoe, the girl exclaims “it fits!” (mm. 407-408) and carries on to “it fits like a glove...” rejoicing in the happy ending of the Cinderella fairy-tale. As the woman and the girl sings in opposition with subtle references to fairy tales and happily-ever-after’s, the underlying message of “Window Shopping” reproaches the futile chase after material wealth and urges the audience to search for more meaning in life.

Polystylism and a Globalized Singapore

A post-modernist approach to incorporating such a variety of styles and influences within a single work could possibly be interpreted as cultural hybridization within our Singaporean melting pot of cultures and amidst trends toward continued globalization. A young Singaporean musician Chua Zi Tao suggested that the cultural hybridity of “Window Shopping” is what forges a Singaporean identity.

The reviewer (Ng 2014) of the premiere of “Window Shopping” similarly acknowledges the variety of musical references: “This light-hearted work had a mix of elements such as neo-Baroque and Broadway.” But does a mix of styles actually indicate that something is hybrid, a word with myriad definitions? “Window Shopping” was created from my lingering interest in research into popular styles that I did while composing the musico-dramatic work “Pursuant”⁴², an opera that morphed into a musical composed in 2013. In retrospect, I question if these multitude of influences and references are essential to “Window Shopping”? Do these references, perhaps, merely serve as a crutch that Jack and I adopted while we were still figuring how to maneuver within the chamber opera genre? Or is this a new, hybrid form emerging? The ambiguities of the genre distinctions between musical theatre and opera make me think that the pleasure of “Window Shopping” lies precisely in these undefined grey areas. But is playing with genre distinctions a particularly Singaporean compositional habit? I think not. But perhaps finding pleasure in things that move beyond the edges of genres somewhat but without breaking the form may be something that is common in Singaporean artistic production. With only half a century since independence, it may be slightly premature for Singapore to claim forging a singular unified musical style, especially given the diversity of our population and its many influences. For that matter, a unified, national-based style might be difficult to find anywhere in the twenty-first century. The healthy variety of musical styles and pluralism of approaches that is present in the current range of Singaporean musics is worth savoring, in a way analogous to the complex and dynamic quality of the highly variable, even vivacious, Singlish.

⁴² Salima Nadira’s (2013) review of “Pursuant” documents the perceived mix of musical influences between genres use of Singapore songs, as well Jonathan Lim’s dystopian narrative of veiled socio-political commentaries.

With the more international sound we adopted for “Window Shopping”, Jack and I decided to employ Standard English in contrast to the Singlish-infused “Laksa Cantata”. Our initial intent was for the piece to have an international appeal and for performances abroad to take place without having to worry about linguistic and pronunciation issues. Although the original setting was imagined to be in a quaint older, urban neighborhood such as Georgetown in Washington DC, we anticipated that it could easily be (re)set in Singapore or other cities in similar kinds of older urban neighborhoods, surely with different architecture but with a similar feeling. Composed without the burden vernacular speech patterns and accent, “Window Shopping” is a blank, albeit urban slate and can be sung by any pair of compatible singers.

In the production of “A Singapore Trilogy” in 2018, there was an informal feedback received from dramaturg Nora Samosir about the cognitive dissonance of the use of the word “dime” betraying the idea that the trilogy is actually based in Singapore. The entire phrase from “A Woman’s Lament” (mm. 86-89) “money can’t buy me love, not a single dime”, was obviously written to rhyme with the next phrase “Every sole inevitably fades with time”. Despite the detail of an American currency being incongruous with our trilogy title proclaiming its Singaporean-ness, the “mixed culture” provides a glimpse of the effects of globalization and migration, recognizing the international outlook of Singapore and its people. It also suggests something interesting about the way in which Singapore is constructed in the minds of audiences when they confront something identified as Singaporean.

Variation in the particularities of location have been incorporated in different productions around the world. In the Manila performance by *Ripieno Ensemble PH*, soprano Stefanie Quintin⁴³ wanted to bring out the woman’s original spoken line “First Lady Marcos had many nice things” (m. 468) and proposed using the full name of the infamous Filipino political figure and shoe-crazed shopaholic Imelda Marcos to make sure local audiences got the reference. In the same production, soprano Pauline Arejola (who played the girl) incorporated the local and iconic MOA (Mall of Asia) to replace the second instance of “from Sydney to Seoul” (mm. 363-364) in the girl’s “Shopping Aria”, incorporating subtle

⁴³ Stefanie Quintin sang the role of the woman with Chloe Lam (the girl) in a concert version in Hong Kong (2015) at Hong Kong New Music Ensemble’s Modern Academy. In retrospect, I wonder why we didn’t incorporate a localization then.

adjustments to speak to the audience in Philippines. The director Malvin Macasaet even added an additional character in the form of a store assistant for his production. In Serina Mara Alonzo's Instagram post/review in response to the Manila performance, she sums up the work's succinctness and Singaporean-ness along with quotations of the libretto:

"Window Shopping" (2014) is the second part of a three-part chamber opera cycle, *A Singapore Trilogy*. 25 minutes—compact, complete, contemporary. This is every shopaholic's opera. "Window Shopping" perfectly captures the Singapore shopping culture and the shopaholic's soul. "[...] to splurge my heart's content for shoes that fit! / Every heel is a piece well-made / With each one a garment to pair / Every pair is money well-spent!" There is no perfect pair, or perfect life. Life isn't about buying shoes, but about the paths that you take. To buy or not to buy? The answer: Tomorrow is another day." (Serina Mara Alonzo 2019)⁴⁴

This suggests that, at least in Southeast Asia, "Window Shopping" may represent Singapore's contemporary shopping culture, conjuring images of the day-to-day activities at Singaporean retail locations. Lily Kong (1995:52) has explored how the references of geographical places within Singaporean popular music provide a means for which Singaporean culture may be conveyed and perceived. Through "Window Shopping", a mundane but quintessential part of Singaporean culture is characterized through reference to the common public spaces of retail shops and malls – the simple daily activity of visiting air-conditioned malls to escape the elements of the warm weather, to run errands, to window-shop and of course to consume food and beverages.

In another instance of localizing, the short film version of the trilogy featured a COVID19 circuit breaker scenario, as a part of a thirty-day online art initiative run by The Straits Times in June-July 2020.⁴⁵ For the girl's "Shopping Aria", Artist Alvin Mark Tan animated sketches of soprano Phoebe Chee as Princess Jasmine flying on a magic carpet across scenes of "Ali Baba's lair" (mm. 307-308) and "From Sydney to Seoul" (mm. 319-321) with the iconic Sydney Opera House and the streets of Myeongdong, a fashion shopping district in Seoul. For the repeat, I proposed another change to Jack and the director Nora for soprano Phoebe Chee to vary "From Sydney to Seoul" (see Fig. 18, mm. 363-364) with "From San Francisco to Tokyo" personalizing it for soprano Phoebe Chee who

⁴⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3fB5bLnuu6/?igshid=1oisu2fzo7ym0> accessed Oct. 14, 2020.

⁴⁵ <https://youtu.be/cF1TtLSkq6E> accessed Oct. 14, 2020.

was, at the time, studying in San Francisco. Jack provided further alliterations of possible city pairings such as “Rio to Rome” and “Havana to Hong Kong”.

ossia

they will take me from San Fran - cis - co to ___ To - kyō!

362

G.

light, they will take me from Syd - ney (Ri - o) to ___ Seoul. (Rome)

Pno.

poco *Rto.*

Figure 18: “Window Shopping”, Girl’s Shopping Aria (mm. 362-364)

Thinking beyond the “Laksa Cantata” and “Window Shopping”, Jack and I pondered the idea of exploring a mix of local and the international voices in our next opera, an effort that had to wait several years as there was no outside impulse or driving force. Although I have to admit that it was not our top artistic concerns to assert a strong sense of national identity in our work, localization and globalization have proven to be equally useful in creating characters that are real, unique and relatable in our third opera.

PART III: “Kopi For One” (Coffee for One)

Characters

WAITRESS – Mezzo-soprano (or Soprano)

DAUGHTER – Soprano, daughter of

FATHER – Baritone (or Tenor)

Premiere cast (2018)

Yee Ee-ping, soprano

Akiko Otao, soprano

Jonathan Charles Tay, tenor

Instrumentation

Flute (*doubling small finger bells*)

Premiere ensemble

Rit Xu

Clarinet in A	Chang Hong
Violin (<i>doubling a low temple block, soft mallet</i>)	Gabriel Lee
Violoncello	Tang I Shyan
Piano (<i>and répétiteur</i>)	Pauline Lee

Synopsis

The third and final part of the Singapore trilogy is set in a common *kopitiam* (coffee shop) in Singapore. As the scene begins, the Waitress appears to be busy with the chores and counting out loud how many times she has to clean the floor as she sings her aria “Day and Night I Sweep”. Those who know Singapore well, will recognize something familiar in the Waitress’ words. She utters a persistent litany of complaints, something that is often identified by Singaporeans as a common form of cultural expression. She is getting jaded of the daily grind, but she sings her tune with a self-deprecating sense of humor.

A female customer (the Daughter) enters the shop and is greeted by the Waitress as if they have known each other for a long time. They catch up a little, reminiscing about old times. The Waitress even remembers the girl’s favorite childhood drink (*Milo Dinosaur*⁴⁶). But of course, now she is all grown up and orders a black coffee (*kopi-O gao, kosong*⁴⁷) just like her father. As the Waitress leaves to make the beverage, the Daughter sits down at a familiar round marble table. Recollecting her childhood and past, she begins singing her “Kopi Aria”, comparing her own life to the essence of coffee.

An old man (the Father) enters the *kopitiam*. He is dressed in an old-fashioned outfit of buttoned-down shirt with high folded sleeves, dress pants, socks and slippers. The Waitress greets him in with friendly banter, as would a *towkay*⁴⁸

⁴⁶ “Milo Dinosaur” is a local iced chocolate drink, made from Milo and condensed milk, topped off with a generous heap of Milo powder. Suitable for anyone with a sweet-tooth, and definitely a favorite amongst young people.

⁴⁷ “*kopi-O*” refers to the plain local black coffee, “*gao*” (in Hokkien) translates as thick or undiluted, and “*kosong*” (in Malay) literally means “empty” and refers to a drink “without sugar”. Thus, *kopi-O gao kosong* is rather bitter and strong, a choice amongst middle-aged or older “uncles,” that is, any man who is older than about 50.

⁴⁸ “*towkay*” a Hokkien term that refers to “boss” or “owner.”

with a regular customer. The Waitress forbids him to order anything new, insisting that he will get his usual drink. In the meantime, the Daughter is preoccupied on her smart phone. The Father then reveals to the Waitress that he is intending “make it right” with his daughter, with whom he has an estranged relationship. After urging him to sort things out with his daughter, the Waitress leaves him alone, giving them some family time in a decidedly public space. He sings his aria of regret – “Why Is This So Hard For Me”, struggling with his inability to communicate freely with his daughter. The aria ends with the Father determined to “right his wrongs.”

The Father walks in slow weighty steps toward the Daughter’s table, they begin to sing seemingly in response to each other. Yet as the duet “I Longed For That Floral Cup/Too Long I Played the Fool is heard”, it eventually becomes apparent that the daughter is not conversing with the Father, but is on the phone, probably speaking with her husband, boyfriend or a close friend. When they end singing “together” they have failed to resolve their conflict. With a sigh, the Father drifts off the stage and disappears while the daughter ends her phone call.

The Waitress then walks in with coffee in hand and approaches the Daughter. Upon asking where the Father is, the Daughter is surprised and replies to the Waitress that she was the only customer in the coffee shop this whole time. The scene ends with the revelation that the Daughter has returned to attend her father’s funeral, an event that has taken place before she stepped into the coffee shop.

Anecdote #3: Of Family Themes

I vividly recall when my friends Reuben Lai and Akiko Otao (co-founders of *L’arietta*) and librettist Jack Lin visited my HDB apartment in the far-eastern part of Singapore in the summer of 2017. The meeting was to discuss an application for the National Arts Council’s Creation Grant scheme. We planned to create and develop “Kopi For One”. My wife Wynne was at home on maternity leave, as she had just given birth to our daughter Clara, a mere two weeks old then. Wynne and I had just become parents and Jack had been dealing with the loss of his father. Through our conversations that day, we determined that the topic of family relations was well suited as a motivation for “Kopi For One”, an active reminder for local audiences to have honest conversations with their parents and children and an aesthetic commentary on what happens when conversations fail. At the

grant interview, we used an excerpt of a dialogue between the Waitress and the Father to illustrate our idea, demonstrating the ways a stereotypical Singaporean father may be unequipped to express love outwardly:

Waitress: You love her don't you?

Father: When I am ready...

Waitress: Ready? When will you ever be ready?

Embracing local sensibilities, we predicted (perhaps hyperbolically) that people would come see the opera, and then be ready, to express their own emotions. We wrote in our proposal that they might even take small steps towards recognizing that we often take for granted those who are closest to us, even though they might actually be those who are the most meaningful. I inscribed on the score of “Kopi For One” the dedication of the work to my wife Wynne and our young daughter Clara, as a reminder to myself and to others to think about the nature of family relations. As the sketching and compositional process began, we designed musical fragments and themes to reflect themes of family communication.

“Wynne’s Theme” was written in 2014-2015 when Wynne and I were both living in Baltimore. This melody is especially meaningful to us, because it was played as a surprise proposal to her in 2015 leading to our engagement; and we also used it as music for the wedding march-in. I have used the theme in three musical works so far, “Kopi For One” (2018), my violin concerto “Vanda” (2014-2018) and an organ work that is written as a friendly gesture by organist and composer Phoon Yu. In “Vanda”, it is woven in as the second theme in the opening movement. In “Kopi For One”, the Father sings of the birth of the Daughter, “reviving me and my wife” (see Fig. 19, mm. 288-291). When setting this line, it was an intuitive decision to refer to my wife and include “Wynne’s Theme” at that moment. The accompaniment recalls the “Window Shopping” motif of the upward steps and downward leap, implying some inter-connected motivic links. This is followed by a lullaby-like passage marked as “children’s night music” with high piano registers and orchestrated transparently with the clarinet echoing Father’s *sotto voce* line and later gently accompanied with the flute.

288 With Nostalgia ♩ = 80
(Wynne's theme)

E. 288
But she re - viv'd me_ and_ my wife, As_ we

Pno. 288 With Nostalgia ♩ = 80
mp (c.l.)

Figure 19: “Kopi For One”, “Wynne’s Theme” (mm. 288-292)

“Clara’s Theme” was inspired by a “melody” played by our daughter on the piano and that I recorded when she was seven or eight months old. Her surprisingly tuneful improvisation, mainly on the black keys was rhythmic and rather regular (see Fig. 20). The pentatonic element in Clara’s piano explorations was perfect for the Father’s aria, as it coincided nicely with the impression of my father’s dabbling with traditional Chinese music (often based on pentatonic scales). Thus, within the Father’s aria, I embedded my own experiences as a new father, as well as referencing some of the sonic associations that I have of my own father. Within the narrative line of “Kopi For One”, Clara’s innocent theme supported within the melody of the Father’s aria marks an especially tender moment where the ghost of the father is singing in recollection of his (estranged) daughter’s earliest years. Similarly, the piano part gently sounds “Clara’s theme” echoed by the violin pizzicato, while the cello persists, father-like, stubbornly with its pentatonic line in five-crotchet groupings.

278 Semplice $\text{♩} = 72$

Fl.

Cl.

Vln. pizz. p

Vc. pp

(Clara's theme)

Vc. When she en-ter'd my life My world was shat-ter'd with tears

278 Semplice $\text{♩} = 72$

Pno.

Figure 20: "Kopi For One", "Clara's Theme" (mm. 278-282)

A Composite of Fathers – Fusing the Personal with Stereotypes

When still sketching the Father's aria, I embraced the initial idea of basing the Father's aria on a pentatonic pitch collection with various excursions, in a plodding 5/4 meter ($\text{♩} = 80$).

266 FATHER

Why (is this) so hard for me? I have jour-ney'd a-cross time,

266

Pno.

E^b (b)

Figure 21: “Kopi For One”, “Father’s Aria”, (mm. 266-268)

The ubiquitous and varied five-note scale is iconic with many cultures from Chinese and Scottish to American. Without delving into a debate of the origins of pentatonicism, here I employed a Chinese version of the scale as a reference to the generation of Chinese-educated Singaporeans to which my own parents belong. In writing the music for the role of the Father, I often thought to myself: “what would my own father have said or done?” My own father played the dizi (Chinese bamboo flute) in Chinese orchestras during his, and Singapore’s younger years⁴⁹ and the association of the pentatonic scale with the Father’s music is a sonically natural choice for me.

At an initial music reading of the chamber opera, a few conflicting opinions about the use of a pentatonic pitch collection in a melodic style that is associated with stereotyping, non-Chinese representations of Chinese people in the “Father’s Aria”. These references are Buddhist chants used to hint at the father’s funeral service and the pentatonic, intentionally “ching-chong”⁵⁰ style of melody. In the end, I decided to hold true to, or even (re)claim, these sonic stereotypes for the “Father’s Aria” as it is precisely those stereotypes that made the melody so instantly suggestive of people all Singaporeans have encountered, often in their

⁴⁹ See the essays of Heng Lena and Samuel Wong in this collection for more about Chinese orchestras.

⁵⁰ A description, commonly used in Singapore, of something that is old-fashioned in a stereotypical Chinese manner.

families. The hint of funeral chants is orchestrated with hand-held percussion instruments subtly doubled by the flautist who wears small finger bells and the violinist playing on the temple block (or Chinese temple block), creating the haunting effect of Buddhist/Taoist scripture being chanted nearby.

Unbeknownst to my daughter when she “played” her melody on the piano, the blackness of the keys she fingered merge with the black of the coffee that the Father often drinks at the *kopitiam*. This specific choice of the drink “*kopi-O gao, kosong*” (literally “coffee-black thick, empty” meaning black coffee, undiluted and without sugar), customized in alternating Malay and Hokkien words for its undiluted aromatic intensity is also a direct reference to my own father’s choice of *kopitiam* drink. On certain days, he would go a step further with *di lok* – Hokkien for “directly poured” from the long-spout metal brewer, without adding any hot water (an even thicker and blacker version of the drink). In addition to thinking about my own father, in the creative process and as a young father, I also pondered how I would deal with my own young daughter once she is she grown. At the public workshop-presentation of the work-in-progress of “Kopi For One” (then titled “Coffee For One”), Nora, Jack and I took turns introducing the Father character. The following is an excerpt of our discussion about the piece:

“Nora: Our third character, the Father, whom our *kopi* auntie has been waiting for and almost have given up on, finally arrives – 2 old friends who gently rib each other. We wonder what their past is [...] but more intriguing is the apparent tension between father and daughter. It seems what we have here is the traditional pattern of strong silent type of father at odds with sugar and spice and all things nice that little girls are made of. Let’s hope that this father, today we have Reuben, can give voice to his innermost feelings.

[Reuben Lai sings an excerpt of Father’s aria, accompanied by Aloysius Foong]

ZY: Once again, being a father, it is not so hard to put myself in the shoes of the Father’s character, as well as portraying the special bond between father and daughter. I also thought about my own relationship with my father, although that’s nowhere as dramatic as this opera. My father used to play the dizi when he was young, and I thought that a pentatonic-influenced sound world makes sense for this Singaporean Chinese old man – the father.

Jack: Although I am not a father myself, I could only relate it to my own experiences and my relationship with my parents. But I felt it is important that both the parent and child had their own voice in this story, told in their own way on equal footing. Sometimes as a child, even when we have “grown up”, it is still difficult to open up or speak freely to our parents. And part of that is a cultural barrier, I believe, at least for me, having grown up in a relatively traditional Asian

household, there were always certain issues that were difficult to address. And I could only imagine the same situation as a parent to their child, especially when the child is no longer a child but an independent adult. It would be things that either parent or child would want to say to each other or hear it being told to them at one point, but somehow it is never said even though either could feel it or sense it.” (Personal communication 2018)⁵¹.

Nora noted that this is a typical Singaporean uncle who frequents a *kopitiam* and the traditional Asian type of the silently loving father, one who doesn't know how to outwardly express his love toward his child. I had tapped on the composites of my own relationship with my father, and my own experiences as a new parent. For Jack, with experience as an Asian boy born and bred in Perth, Australia, educated in the US who eventually moved back to Singapore, “Kopi For One” had perhaps deeper autobiographical elements. It was a difficult libretto for him to write, partly revealed through the gaps across the timeline of “Laksa Cantata” (2012-2013), “Window Shopping” (2014), and “Kopi For One” (2017-2018). From our conversations, it is clear that he was daunted by the considerable success of the first two instalments, during which he suffered the loss of his own father, resulting in a serious writer's block for the third instalment of the trilogy. Encouraged by the creative team and the production team at *L'arietta*, Jack eventually mustered the courage and began writing “Kopi For One”. It served as a healing process and, ultimately, a meaningful way to remember his own father.

Waitress (*kopitiam auntie*) as Comic Relief

Musically, the Waitress is a humorous character developed through a variety of melodic articulations, oscillating between humorous *staccato* and melodramatic *legato*. At times, the ensemble supports her with “dusty” sweeping sounds, and at times sparkling with clean pointillist textures. As a character-type, the Waitress is synonymous to the “auntie” – the commonplace term that Singaporeans use to address any middle-aged woman, related by blood or otherwise. The Waitress is affectionately, and instantly, perceived by the audience as the *kopitiam auntie*, a

⁵¹ “Coffee For One: From Page to Stage” was presented on Monday, 16 July 2018 7:30pm at the Blue Room, The Arts House. The change in the title to “Kopi For One” was decided during this workshop period, to further localize the work through referencing the words at *kopitiam* around Singapore.

familiar character who works at local coffee shops dishing out *kopi* and *kaya*, coconut jam, toast breakfast sets. Recalling Singaporean actor/producer Michelle Chong's entertaining caricatures of Singaporean stereotypes, "*Premium Lian*" was also prominently in his mind.⁵²

In her aria "Day and Night I Sweep", the Waitress complains to the audience "as I am mother and father to this place". Her aside to the audience, "this is *lim-bu*'s place leh!"⁵³ immediately intensifies her complaint with great comic effect. Although slightly brusque at times, Jack's amalgam of the two stereotypes packs a distinct local flavor that we "hear" as characteristic of a *kopitiam* auntie. Yee Ee-Ping, a Singaporean soprano based in London, reported that when she was in Singapore practicing her lines in her mother's apartment (probably in the kitchen) for the premiere, such "unrefined" phrases sung out of context simply astounded her mother. This suggested to us that our construction of the *kopitiam* auntie for the role of The Waitress was reasonably close to correct.

Early on, in one of the music workshops for "Kopi For One", mezzo-soprano Melissa Chan commented that it reminds her of William Bolcom's "Cabaret Songs". The combination of the mix of spoken/sung text, humor, and Jazz-influenced harmonies are probably the elements that create the affinity to Bolcom's music.⁵⁴ However, the resemblance ends there. To stay in line with the Waitress' localized character, our dramaturg Nora Samosir suggested substituting the expression of "mom and pop" with the more vernacularized "*ma* and *pa*". Recalling older Singaporean types who frequent her *kopitiam*, such as the Father character (and his pentatonic-infused music), the Waitress sings "Old folks return for their *kaya*-toasts..." (mm. 70-73). This *kopitiam* auntie also virtuosically displays her impressive memory and versatility in her asides shouting out an impressive string of local beverage orders⁵⁵ (m. 73) and commenting that young

⁵² The name for Chong's character, "*Premium Lian*" was derived from "*ah-lian*" a Hokkien term referring to a local "bad" girl or woman who is rather foul-mouthed. See Michelle Chong's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqXMPBGi21slRVOLP6anHfg> accessed Oct. 15, 2020.

⁵³ Usually in Hokkien, the phrase is "*lim-bei*" – which crudely translates as "your father" but refers to the first person saying it; "*lim-bu*" is a variation of that, "your mother."

⁵⁴ Email from Melissa Chan, Jan. 34, 2018.

⁵⁵ This is commonly heard at local *kopitiams*, where servers take orders and immediately shout out the long list of orders, over the heads of the customers, to their co-workers who then speedily prepare the food and drinks.

customers come to share their posts on a long list of social-media platforms (m. 79). I intentionally left open the possibility for the performer to improvise in these humorous asides, by making their own lists, and with the possibility for updates of the ever-changing digital platforms. In the premiere performances, Melissa Chan and Yee Ee-Ping were happy to request and recite the lists created by Jack. His highly individualized beverage orders provided a distinctly localized feel to its rhythmic pattern, while the list of social media platforms gave an accurate time stamp to 2018 that rang with their respective notification tones played by the ensemble (see Fig. 22). The savvy local auntie server then proceeds to check her phone revealing “38 new likes”; thirty-eight (*sam-bat*) is a rather insulting number that resounds in Mandarin/Cantonese suggesting that she is a *kaypoh* – gossipy middle-aged woman.

79 [aside: improvise a string of social-media platforms] (♩ = 90) (parodying a ringtone)

W. on (Facebook, Instagram, WeChat, KakaoTalk, Snapchat, Messenger) You've got 38 new likes!

Pno. (♩ = 90) p Fl. 3 f Vc. Vln.

Figure 22: “Kopi For One”, social-media platforms (mm. 79-81)

To further stretch the comic characterization and composite embodiment of a varieties of local *kopitiam aunties*, this particular Waitress is sophisticated enough to sing a line such as “hearing scandals of wondrous pleasure” (mm. 85-86) and hip enough to embed a Millennial-slang within “I secretly judge their *epic fails!*” (mm. 94-96). As she sings “hipsters come to share their posts”, her usually light-hearted music slows down in an attempt to be hip, marked by “Trying to be R & B” with a slow duple compound time (see Fig. 23, m. 74). Our dramaturg Nora Samosir observed that although plausible, this versatile and erudite, Waitress auntie would be one who works at a *kopitiam* in higher-end residential areas in Singapore such as Holland Village or Bukit Timah.

[aside: improvise an impressive string of local breakfast/drink orders]

70
W. Old folks re - turn for their ka - ya toasts and (Teh Si Siew Dai, Teh-O, Kopi-O Kosong, Kopi-C Gao, Milo Peng)

Pno.

74 Trying to be R & B ♩ = 60 half spoken
Hip - sters come to share their posts

Pno. Trying to be R & B ♩ = 60
mp *p*
half pedal (very light)

Figure 23: “Kopi For One”, the versatile Waitress (mm. 70-78)

In another reference to popular culture, the line “my chores will go on” resonates with the theme song from the 1997 film *Titanic* “My Heart Will Go On” sung by Celine Dion. The quotation begins with an almost obsessed cycling around a buoyant single tone (A-flat here) over my own reharmonization, melodically combined the *secco* motif of the Waitress (m. 45) in order inject a bit more musical humor. Her melodramatic reference to the *Titanic* theme song ends with her repeating “and on and on”, accelerating beyond control (See Fig. 24).

44 **44** *meno mosso* (Ballad-like) $\text{♩} = 60$
(suddenly melodramatic)

W. As I am mother and father to this place!

Pno.

47 **48** as long as a breath allows!
(My chores will go on and

Figure 24: “Kopi For One”, *Titanic* quotation in Waitress’ Aria (mm. 44-49)

“Trio” in Counterpoint

During one of the workshops, I noted that there was not a single passage within the libretto where all three characters are in action simultaneously, suggesting that an obvious dramatic possibility that was missing. I also viewed this as a structural problem and asked for inputs from the creative team. A few interesting ideas were proposed address this issue, one would be that the Waitress might sing an offstage version of her own music at a suitable point during the Duet of the Father and the Daughter. Nora pointed out that the lines of the Father-Daughter duet needed to be heard clearly for the drama to work. Thus, the presence of a third voice would be possible, but it had to be something that the audience would register aurally and visually but in the background. This implied some sort of interwoven counterpoint, juxtaposition, or interpolation. As a joke, the pianist/*répétiteur*

Aloysius Foong playfully suggested that the Waitress can sing her comically persistent “on and on” from the background or offstage. Everyone laughed out loud, but understood immediately that that was the solution we were looking for. Jack and I proceeded to incorporate that as part of the concluding “Trio”, using the text in which the Waitress is heard in the background singing about her chores, effectively adding a third layer to the sonic texture. This compositional decision develops the contrapuntal dramatic form that we had already explored in the “Ending” of “Window Shopping”, in which the disparate lines of the three characters weave in and out, yet always maintain an independence their emotional and musical character.

The Waitress leisurely begins the “Trio”, passing observations on her customers in the background, referring to the Father with “Old folks return for their *kopi-O*”, while “others” imply younger people like the Daughter – whom the waitress had thought was simply on her phone sharing insta-stories. In composing for this scene, I have aligned texts that are similar in sound to occur together (see underlined text in Fig. 25). Coincidences such as the Father’s “long” and the Daughter’s “longed”, or “final”, “fulfillment” and “finish” serve to tether to one another texts of slightly different meanings indicating sonic connections as well as emotional ones. “Never” appears in all three characters’ lines, and they are placed within two bars of proximity, allowing the audience to hear the same word repeated in three different voices and contexts. Another method employed in the interweaving of texts was to juxtapose corresponding references (see bold text in Fig. 25). Hearing the Daughter sing of “taste” and “bitter-sweet regrets” in close proximity with the Waitress’ phrase, “aromatic kopi, quite nice *hor?*” creates a stark contrast of perspectives based the same reference of coffee. The Father’s regret about not being a better parent “as father and as mother” opposes the Waitress’ light-hearted complaint of serving “as mother and father” to the coffee shop.

Trio

FATHER

DAUGHTER

WAITRESS

Old folks return for their
kopi-O

Others come to share their
stories

Too long I played the fool, I longed for that floral cup,

<p>Never faithful to my heart,</p> <p>Always blinded by fear and shame,</p> <p>This is my <u>final</u> moment!</p> <p>I never <u>regretted</u> this life,</p> <p>Dutifully performing my role,</p> <p>But to be as father and as mother,</p> <p>Was too heavy a burden to bear,</p> <p>It was fate that dealt this hand,</p>	<p>Though I had <u>never</u> savoured its fill,</p> <p>I imagined it is what I seek</p> <p>To attain this feeling of <u>fulfilment</u>,</p> <p>I travelled so far to seek this taste,</p> <p>But only found bitter- sweet regrets,</p> <p>Haunted by feelings of neglect,</p> <p>I came to realise my folly,</p> <p>My life has the essence of coffee,</p>	<p>Brewing, serving and cleaning <u>never ending</u></p> <p>But, this is my daily grind!</p> <p>Grinding, brewing and serving <i>kopi</i></p> <p>I never ever <u>finish</u> my chores</p> <p>Everyday I make this aromatic kopi</p> <p>Actually, quite nice <i>hor</i>⁵⁶?</p> <p>As I serve as mother and father to this <i>kopitiam</i>.</p> <p>My chores will go on, and on, and on and on,</p>
---	--	--

⁵⁶ A Singlish word added to the end of a phrase with a rising tone, to seek agreement.

my chores will go on,
and go on,
and on

Figure 25: “Kopi For One”, “Trio” libretto with added layer of Waitress’ lines

Thus, in this concluding “Trio” scene that featuring Jonathan Charles Tay (Father), Akiko Otao (Daughter), and Yee Ee-Ping (Waitress), all three characters are present more or less simultaneously (see Fig. 26). The Daughter sings grievingly, mourning her father, while the Father sings to her with slow-moving lines, musically representing his otherworldly temporal state. From the background of her pantry, oblivious to the Girl and the Father, the Waitress comically interjects from time to time with her quirky light-hearted complaints of her daily grind. The juxtaposition and stratification of their lines that stemmed from melodic materials of their own arias successfully weave the three characters and their music together in a contrapuntal fabric. In support, the small ensemble of instruments provided a three-way texture, orchestrated accordingly to their previous arias. The Daughter’s music echoes with the pianistic flow of subdivisions that moved around the ensemble; the Father’s music occupies the low registers with cello and clarinet timbres, while the Waitress’ music sparkled with joy and humor in pointillist pizzicato and staccato. Furthermore, a multi-layered trio provides a microcosm for the parallel conversations, overlapping activities, and simultaneities that happen naturally in an actual kopitiam.



Figure 26: “A Singapore Trilogy” production (2018) “Kopi For One”, “Trio” scene
(Photo credit: *L’arietta Productions*)

Common Threads – Counting

Jack’s obsession with counting began with a direct reference to Mozart’s “Figaro” in “Laksa Cantata”, where the groom Stephen counts down the number of days leading to his wedding. Following suit in “Window Shopping”, the Woman reminisces with a retrospective counting of how many years has passed since she was last at that space and perhaps reflecting upon her youthful ‘addiction’ to retail therapy. Finally, in “Kopi For One”, the Waitress counts, in terms of the passage of time, but also complains about the number of repetitions as a particular chore goes “on and on.” Counting has become one of the threads that binds the parts of the “A Singapore Trilogy” together. The following libretto excerpts compares the respective counting passages from all three chamber operas.

“Laksa Cantata” – Stephen’s counting (mm. 1-9, 2018 revised version)

(spoken, counting out loud)

One . . . two . . . three . . .
five . . . six . . . seven . . .
ten days until the wedding . . .
Oh, wait . . . fourteen . . . two weeks!
OH!
. . . FOUR weeks!
Wow! Where has the time gone?
. . . Where is Leah? Has she gone off shopping again?

“Window Shopping” – Woman’s counting: (mm. 10-26)
Oh, I remember this place! How many years ago did I shop here?
Ah yes, that pair of blue heels was bought here, what was it . . .
(spoken) Five, eight, ten years ago?
(sung) Time just passes by . . .

“Kopi For One” – Waitress’ counting (mm. 5-20 and mm.103-107)
(spoken) Wah! How time flies... where is the old man?
So dirty! This is the third time today!
(sung) Day and night I sweep this floor,
Every day twice...three times...or Four!
Cleaning, washing and sweeping – all my chores,
How many times must I sweep this floor?
Every day twice...three times...or more!
(...)
Some days five times six...seven or more!

“Kopi For One” – Dialogue between Waitress and Daughter (mm. 146-155)

D: That was a long time ago...
W: My...time passes by really fast...
D: Blink an eye and twenty years passes

W: old folks like us just fade away...

D: waiting for nobody...

Counting is established as an opening gambit in all three works of “A Singapore Trilogy.” Since we are trying to create something that’s about everyday Singaporean people, it doesn’t get simpler than counting. Dealing with the mundanity of chores, I have attempted to have some fun in playing with numbers (see Fig. 27). At bars 106-108, “Five” is allotted five sub-divisions, and reaches up for the dominant (F#); “six” gets a 6/8 measure on the sub-median (G#); and finally, “seven” receives a total of seven sub-divisions beginning on a leading tone of A#. The next layer of numerology is applied to the playful orchestration and text painting where intervals of fifths (E-B), sixths (F#-D#) and sevenths (B-A#) color the sung numbers, ending with a fermata on “more”.

The musical score for Figure 27, titled "Kopi For One", counting in Waitress' Aria (mm. 103-107), is presented in a standard orchestral format. It features six staves: Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vc.), Waitress (W.), and Piano (Pno.).

- Flute (Fl.):** Starts at measure 103 with a dynamic of *p*. The notation includes a 4-measure phrase with a dynamic shift to *mf*, followed by *mp*, *p*, and *pp* dynamics. A fermata is placed over the final note.
- Clarinet (Cl.):** Starts at measure 103 with a dynamic of *p*. The notation includes a 4-measure phrase with a dynamic shift to *mf*, followed by *mp*, *p*, and *pp* dynamics. A fermata is placed over the final note.
- Violin (Vln.):** Starts at measure 103 with a dynamic of *p*. The notation includes a 4-measure phrase with a dynamic shift to *mf*, followed by *mp*, *p*, and *pp* dynamics. A fermata is placed over the final note.
- Viola (Vc.):** Starts at measure 103 with a dynamic of *p*. The notation includes a 4-measure phrase with a dynamic shift to *mf*, followed by *mp*, *p*, and *pp* dynamics. A fermata is placed over the final note.
- Waitress (W.):** Starts at measure 103 with a dynamic of *mf*. The notation includes a 4-measure phrase with a dynamic shift to *mf*, followed by *mp*, *p*, and *pp* dynamics. A fermata is placed over the final note. The lyrics are: "Some days five times six, se - ven or more!".
- Piano (Pno.):** Starts at measure 103 with a dynamic of *mf*. The notation includes a 4-measure phrase with a dynamic shift to *mf*, followed by *mp*, *p*, and *pp* dynamics. A fermata is placed over the final note.

Figure 27: “Kopi For One”, counting in Waitress’ Aria (mm. 103-107)

Knowing that “Laksa Cantata” and “Window Shopping” will be performed in the same room (Living Room of The Arts House), Jack retroactively infused Stephen’s counting-out-loud with a detail of Leah’s implied pastime of “has she gone of shopping again?” In essence, Jack and I took the 2018 revisions of “Laksa Cantata” and the creation of “Kopi For One” as an opportunity to interweave various connecting threads within the trilogy. In another interlocking detail, the Daughter first appears in “Kopi For One” with a musical atmosphere reminiscent of the Woman’s *Prelude* from “Window Shopping”’s opening, musically and dramatically providing a sense of nostalgia as she interacts with the bubbly Waitress. Thus, in addition to “counting” and the passage of time, interwoven textual and musical cross-references serve to bind the three chamber operas together.

Common Threads: Motivic Connections

The subjects of consumption and vernacular culture are present in all three. With *Laksa* and *Kopi*, it is a literal kind of consumption, while “Window Shopping” touches the idea of consumption through consumerism. Musically, there are also recurring motivic relationships between the three parts of this trilogy. Motivic relationships are present either as intentional references, subconscious connections, or more generally explained as musical idiosyncrasies of a personal style.

The Daughter’s aria begins simply with sustained strings and gradually grows in the intensity of rhythmic activities, orchestrational density, and complexity of colors. The tempo also increases in several gradual steps from a *nostalgic* ($\text{♩} = 60$) to a *poco agitato* ($\text{♩} = 80$), eventually draining away after the emotional peak of “gone are the *long* notes and fragrant taste” of her Father’s favorite black coffee. A sustained middle C# moves around the room like the aroma of coffee: from the clarinet to the flute and then the violin, where the Daughter picks up her starting pitch. In synchronization with the overarching subject matter of consumption, the melodic line of her “Kopi Aria” (see Fig. 28) begins in a manner similar to Stephen’s “Laksa Aria” (see Fig. 29). This intentional decision directly connects the literal senses of smell and taste between the two operas despite varying emotional states. Stephen being passionate for “the fiery laksa” (mm. 73-75)

where spice describes both *laksa* and his bride-to-be Leah; while the Daughter is bittersweet about her life having the “essence of coffee.”

114 *mp* bittersweet

D. My life has the es - sence of cof - fee.

Figure 28: “Kopi For One”, Daughter’s “Kopi Aria” (mm. 114-116)

73 *mp* *mf* *f*

A pas - sion for the fie ry Lak - sa!

Figure 29: “Laksa Cantata”, Stephen’s Aria (mm. 73-75)

Melodically, the Prelude of “Window Shopping” exhibits certain similarities in the general stepwise rising shape, and the falling of a minor seventh. The opening line suggests nostalgia. “Oh, I remember this place” (see Fig. 30). I must admit that I was not consciously trying to connect “Window Shopping” with “Laksa Cantata” in this passage, but rather, explaining the similarity as a subconscious motivic connection is more plausible here.

mp

Oh, I re-mem-ber this place!

Figure 30: “Window Shopping”, Woman’s Prelude (mm. 10-12)

Stepwise motion is often following by the leap of a seventh, again resolving with smaller leaps and stepwise motion. As observed by my colleagues, this particular melodic signature does indeed occur throughout the three chamber operas,

although I was unaware of it during the composition. Other compositional consistencies within my own works include the use of harmonies that feature tertian extensions, textures created by micro-cansons, colorful “hand-made” orchestration, and counterpoints created through both voice and timbre. Within the context of “A Singaporean Trilogy”, the variation in subject matter, dramatic trajectories also demanded that the musical content have three distinct feelings and contexts, yet that they remain coherent in style and identity.

Interweaving Stories through “Local Flavors”

Jack had envisioned the Daughter character as a Singaporean-born, foreign-educated adult who immigrated to a distant (or culturally distant) country. Due to the tensions between her and the Father, she sought to leave Singapore forever when she was a teenager. Dressed in a black dress, she returns to the local *kopitiam* where she had grown up, reflecting on her life away from home and her sudden return. The Daughter poignantly expresses her longing for the sense of home, her youth, and the past. In her dialogue with the chirpy, seemingly familiar Waitress, the Daughter’s internationalized Singaporean identity is apparent. She uses no local expressions except for the mention of the drink *kopi-O gao*, *kosong* (thick black coffee, without sugar). But she could be the same person at different stages of life.

In the program notes for “A Singapore Trilogy” (2018), director Nora Samosir writes:

“Welcome on our journey through different stages in the life of a woman. The heady halcyon days of carefree spending turning into the first phases of the householder and then, confronting mortality amidst mid-life vitality. As you move from one to the next of our three chamber operas, we hope you will be able to make links to your own life experiences and also to draw a thorough line from “Window Shopping” to “Laksa Cantata” to “Kopi For One”. As an additional fun task, see if you can pick out a dainty accessory that appear in all three pieces.” (Samosir 2018)

Samosir notes that through “A Singapore Trilogy”, we see the recurring female figure as she matures from her youthful materialistic phrase, through the experience love and the rites of a typical Singaporean wedding and HDB flat ownership, ending finally as she grapples with crises of age and mortality. In the

production we used a “dainty” accessory to chain the trilogy together, a simple silver bracelet that the three singers wore to subtle effect.

Within “Window Shopping”, the young Girl in her twenties and the more mature Woman in her thirties have been envisioned as the same person, separated by the time frame of a decade. Dramatically, this was portrayed by Akiko Otao playing the roles of the Woman and the Girl in different productions and fully realized in the studio recording with her recording both voices. Jack and I generally left it as the director’s choice as to whether to shape them as the same person. In turn, the relationship between them is also left open-ended for the audience to draw their own conclusions. If cast as the older reflection of the Girl, the lamenting Woman of “Window Shopping” may also be synonymous to the Daughter of “Kopi For One”. The Daughter in “Kopi For One”, resembles the Woman in “Window Shopping” in other aspects that go beyond their music, both characterized by nostalgia, lament and despair. Both the Woman and the Daughter may be in their thirties, an age range that suggests a self-sufficient and independent woman. A connection of father-daughter relationship between the Girl and Daughter may also be drawn. There was a reference to a father character in the Girl’s shopping aria: “Every purchase drains my dad, but sets me on the path to success.” A plausible backstory that was posited by *L’arietta* in their production, suggested that the death of the Girl’s father was the turning point transitioning the Girl into the Woman.

	“Window Shopping”	“Laksa Cantata”	“Kopi For One” (<i>premiere</i>)
<i>Year written:</i>	2014	2012-2013	2018
<i>Roles:</i>	GIRL	LEAH	DAUGHTER
<i>Life phases:</i>	materialism /twenties	marriage/ owning a flat	confronting mortality /thirties
<i>Theme:</i>	youth	love	life/death
<i>Singer:</i>	Phoebe Chee	Ng Jingyun	Akiko Otao
<i>Duration:</i>	20’	20’	30’
<i>Show order:</i>	1	2	3

Figure 31: A through-line threading “A Singapore Trilogy” (2018)

The through-line made apparent by the Girl-Leah-Daughter thread implied a particular order for the venue-specific show, not one based on the dates of composition for the three separate operas (see Fig. 31). “A Singapore Trilogy” (2018) was performed at the historic Arts House (also known as the Old Parliament House at the civic district), where “Laksa Cantata” first premiered in 2013. *L’arietta* had a unique production concept of simultaneous performances in two rooms with “Window Shopping” and “Laksa Cantata” playing in the Living Room, transforming the shoe boutique into a wedding gown boutique with minimal and swift set change involving the alternation between an alluring display of shoes and three sets of glittering wedding gowns.⁵⁷ Across the hallway, “Kopi For One” was performed in the Blue Room (see Fig. 32), with a small adjoining room that served as the Waitress’ pantry and backstage.

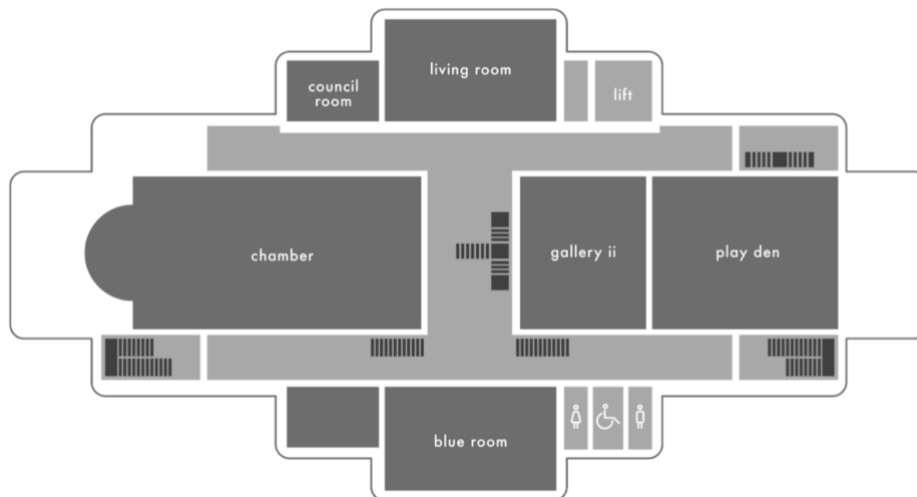


Figure 32: Layout of the second level of The Arts House⁵⁸

⁵⁷ The shoes were sponsored by Zalora; the wedding gowns were sponsored by Grace Atelier Weddings.

⁵⁸ Used with permission from Arts House Limited, the image of the layout is extracted from its venue kit, <https://www.theartshouse.sg/assets/AHL-venue-kit/TAH-VenueKit-2019-updated.pdf> accessed Oct. 15, 2020.

The audience groups switched venues during intermission. Beginning at the Living Room, one group of audience experienced “A Singapore Trilogy” in the chronology of “Window Shopping” – “Laksa Cantata” – (*intermission*) “Kopi For One”; the other group went in reverse order (see Fig. 31) starting at the Blue Room. This meant that the singers and instrumentalists performed each opera twice in each show, across four evening and matinee shows over a weekend (Oct. 12-14, 2018). Due to the differences in playing time (see Fig. 31), the built-in intermissions were necessarily staggered. Adding to the musico-dramatic experience of the trilogy, reception refreshments were served during these intermissions in the adjoining room “backstage” of the Blue Room featuring local drinks of *kopi*, *teh*, and *milo*⁵⁹ and Peranakan snacks called *nyonya kueh*.⁶⁰ An immersive setting of a local *kopitiam* was created in the Blue Room with real samples of old-fashioned, tall metal coffee brewers with long spouts, ceramic small cups and saucers, stacked cans of condensed milk and evaporated milk, the retro “good morning” white towels, a classic round marble table as the centerpiece and the audience sitting on wooden stools and a whiff of *kopi* ready to be served. In fact, the Hot Coffee-O, Hot Tea-O and Hot Milo were served by Singapore’s own Ya Kun Café at each performance.

Visually, the three Singaporean themes of “Laksa”, “Shopping” and “Kopi” were threaded together by a triptych-style poster (see Fig. 33) created by Singapore artist Alvin Mark Tan⁶¹. This aspect of artistic collaboration brought to life the respective color symbols already present in the libretti. The color schemes of each opera were reflected accordingly: red for the bowl of spicy *laksa* and passion; blue for “the pair of blue heels” and a reflection and melancholy; black for “*kopi-O gao kosong*” and mortality. Alvin’s mixed media of line drawing and water color brought together the likeness of performers from previous productions, as well as his sketches of various rehearsals. The triptych artwork

⁵⁹ *kopi*, *teh* and *milo* – classic local drinks of coffee, tea, and a local brand of chocolate drink. (‘Milo Dinosaur’ is an indulgent variation of this drink.) The beverages, stools, and some tableware were sponsored in part, by Ya Kun Café Pte Ltd.

⁶⁰ *nyonya kueh* – sweet, colourful pastries usually made of glutinous rice. This was sponsored by Kim Choo Kuah Chang

⁶¹ Alvin Mark Tan was brought into the creative collaboration because I chanced upon his colorful sketchbook *La Kopi* at a café (The Assembly Ground). In his second edition of the sketchbook, the triptych poster of “A Singapore Trilogy” was included documenting the collaboration.

also served as part of the set draped in the Blue Room and the Living Room. As such, the production of “A Singapore Trilogy” was designed for a uniquely Singaporean experience that saturated the senses.



Figure 33: Triptych poster of “A Singapore Trilogy” by Alvin Mark Tan

Singaporean Opera?

Love of food, material desires, and the use of beverages as a lubricant for difficult discussions and thinking in a café are not particularly Singaporean. However, “A Singapore Trilogy” deals with the complexities of human relationships as expressed through local subjects, rendering the manifestations of these ubiquitous themes Singaporean. With these vignettes threaded together as “A Singapore Trilogy”, we aimed to push the limits of Singaporean chamber opera in terms of musical sophistication and dramatic depth. The question is, did it work? In an

online review by a regular arts blogging team (bakchormeeboy 2019), *L'arietta* was praised for the significant contribution to the local opera scene by championing relevant contemporary chamber operas and providing a stage for a healthy mix of local singers:

“Chamber operas capturing the little moments that make us quintessentially Singaporean.

What is it about Singapore that captures our local spirit in its entirety? In *L'arietta*'s latest production, the local chamber opera company attempts to do just that in their own way as they presents ‘A Singapore Trilogy’.

Comprising of three chamber operas composed by Dr Chen Zhangyi and with libretto by Jack Lin, ‘A Singapore Trilogy’ examines three groups of Singaporeans at different stages of their lives as they engage in quintessentially local pastimes – eating, shopping, and even drinking kopi.

(...)

While certainly a bold statement to title it ‘A Singapore Trilogy’, *L'arietta* pushes past the limitations of their space to produce not one but three complete works that adhere to their ethos of cosy, accessible opera just about anyone can appreciate, showcasing a good mix of both veteran singers and young talents. It takes a lot of work to get to where they are today, and we can only look forward to their next performance as they continue to mould the scene and groom the talents of tomorrow.

What one is left with is how all of these pastimes, whichever one we choose to indulge in, there is something in each that speaks to us profoundly about what it means to be Singaporean, connecting us as one people; we love and laugh with our culture of food, crave the thrill and adrenaline rush of “Window Shopping”, and making us very much crave sitting down at the end of it all for a nice cup of kopi, and just letting the world pass us by.”⁶² (bakchormeeboy 2019),

The naming of the work was a moderately brave, if logical to us, decision. It would have been, perhaps, even bolder had we used a different article and called it “The Singapore Trilogy”, which happens to be triptych of political plays by local writer Robert Yeo. But our work is not particularly political, perhaps iconic, there are always more representations of Singaporean with which to contend – hence “A” and not “The”. Our “A Singapore Trilogy” just aims to dish up a few servings of Singaporean daily life while demonstrating that Singaporeans are as complex and

⁶² This reviewer attended the matinee performance on Sunday, Oct. 14, 2018.

troubled as people in any location in the world. Although localized in detail, our themes are human. So, is this Singaporean art or is it international or are these the wrong questions?

In terms of using the vernacular Singlish, an element that decidedly Singaporean, we have adopted three distinct approaches ranging from the local to the global. “*Laksa Cantata*” generally takes a localized approach, especially with Stephen’s persistent use of Singlish in his recitatives and aria about the steaming bowl of *laksa*. On the opposite end of the spectrum, “*Window Shopping*” takes an international approach in which a globalized Singaporean-ness is expressed through the love-hate relationship of shopping within a non-linear narrative. “*Kopi For One*” balances both ends of the spectrum and creates a middle ground wherein the mix of the varieties of Singlish and other influences reflect a Singaporean reality: this is fully present in the Waitress’ character as she traverses deftly between local colloquialisms and more sophisticated English expressions, while dabbling in millennial slangs. The Father’s lines reveal local style of Singlish conversation with the Waitress that turns more international, perhaps representing his understanding of himself, through the use of a more Standard English in his aria. The Daughter’s lines are inflected with minimal Singlish, portraying a globalized Singaporean voice, one that shares a common thread with words and affect of the Girl/Woman from “*Window Shopping*”, and to a lesser extent, with Leah in “*Laksa Cantata*”. The composite nature of these characters within “*A Singapore Trilogy*” reflect, to a great extent, the dynamism of Singaporean language and life.

Audience response to *L’arietta*’s staging of “*A Singapore Trilogy*” was generally extremely positive. Chang Tou Liang, critic for *The Straits Times* penned the following review, entitled “Realizing the dream of Singaporean opera” (Chang 2018).

“In opera parlance, *Il Trittico* refers to three one-act operas by the Italian Giacomo Puccini, namely *Il Tabarro*, *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi*.

Singapore has been bestowed a *Trittico* of its own by young composer Chen Zhangyi and librettist Jack Lin, whose *A Singapore Trilogy* was performed complete for the first time in a single sitting at a single venue.

All three operas, sung in English and directed by veteran thespian Nora Samosir, had typically Singaporean settings with characters and inter-personal relationships one could readily identify with.

Opera company L'arietta spared little effort in creating an immersive experience by staging the performances simultaneously in two different spaces within The Arts House, with the audience up close and featuring some of the local vocal scene's finest voices.

Receiving its world premiere in The Blue Room was *Kopi For One* (2018), centred on an estranged father-daughter relationship within a neighbourhood kopitiam, or coffee shop.

Soprano Akiko Otao and tenor Jonathan Charles Tay played protagonists who seemed remote despite the familial connection.

Their disparate personalities were brought together by the levity of soprano Yee Ee-Ping's cleaning "auntie" with her unabashed Singlish and spouted colloquialisms.

This emotional distance, although initially jarring, was well-founded. It was only in the opera's final minutes when the twist was revealed: The father we saw and heard was a ghost.

The music was modern yet tonal, accompanied by an ensemble of violin, cello, flute, clarinet and piano, conducted by the composer himself. As if to complete the experience, the audience were also treated to coffee, tea, Milo and a selection of nyonya kueh during the intermission.

They were later ushered to The Living Room for the far more light-hearted "Laksa Cantata" (2013), a Singaporean update on the story in J.S. Bach's *Coffee Cantata*. Soon-to-wed Stephen (tenor Samuel Ng) and Leah (soprano Ng Jingyun) fuss over whether laksa lemak should be served at their nuptials. What appeared to be a sure recipe for a split soup soon resolved in a steaming hot bowl of compromise.

Here the dreamy Stephen and feisty Leah were well-characterised by both Ngs, helped by witty dialogue, and their final waltz of blissful truce eventually sealed the deal.

Finally, reminiscence and reflection dominated "Window Shopping" (2014), where sopranos Felicia Teo and Phoebe Chee held sway.

Engaging in a favourite local pastime, the two women elicit different reactions after stepping into a high-end shoe boutique.

The wistfulness of Teo's older woman contrasted starkly with Chee's ecstatic young girl, but both were essentially the same person separated by the passage of time. Exuberance of youth gives way to wizened experience, with the unifying factor being Chen's jazz-inflected score played by the same instrumental combination led by Aloysius Foong.

Two decades ago, Singaporean opera seemed a distant dream. Today, it has become par for the course. With this excellent trilogy, Chen should no longer be referred to as a composer of promise, but one of stature.” (Chang 2018)

L'arietta's webpage⁶³ also displayed a variety of positive responses collected from the audience feedback of “A Singapore Trilogy”:

“Thank you L'arietta for an exhilarating emotional ride on the opening night of Singapore Trilogy. Stellar performance by a stellar cast – electrifying vocal display combined with deeply moving acting, gorgeous sets and effective lighting transported us through time while exploring the various stages of life. This production showcased local talents and makes us proud to be Singaporean! Bravo!”
– Benedict Goh

“L'arietta Productions' A Singapore Trilogy is an amazing production, and I am very excited to see local operas being commissioned. Singaporean composer Dr Chen Zhangyi has developed a unique musical language quite unlike anything else, one that simply draws you into another realm, letting you look at these seemingly “everyday slices of life” with a new pair of eyes...The future of opera in Singapore, as well as Singapore opera, is bright with L'arietta Productions, and I look forward to even more productions that touch us.” – Sulwyn Lok

These statements reveal a sense of pride arising from seeing Singaporean culture represented in an art form that most often depicts cultures and times that are far distant from contemporary Singapore (but also far away and distant for most people who encounter them today). I think seeing local, Singaporean culture on stage in any musical context makes the performance “a” Singaporean one whether or not the genre of opera is an international one.

L'arietta Company voices a staunch advocacy for chamber opera, an art form that is intimate and reflective of contemporary culture as expressed through the compact coalescence of various artistic elements (*L'arietta*, n.d). “A Singapore Trilogy” provides new possibilities for expectations about what opera is and should be, both in Singapore and in the world.

⁶³ <http://www.lariettasg.com/portfolio.html> accessed Oct. 15, 2020.

Coda: Pandemic 2020-2021

As the local and global arts scene moved into a new reality of virtual performances during the Covid-19 pandemic, *The Straits Times*' 30 Days of Art initiative commissioned *L'arietta* to produce "A Singapore Trilogy" *Suite* as a short film.⁶⁴ Three "title" arias were selected specifically to depict three local vignettes of contrasting personalities and some of the realities experienced during the "Circuit Breaker" or lockdown in Singapore. From "Kopi For One", soprano Akiko Otao sang the Daughter's "Kopi Aria" reflecting the bitter loss of family member (reflecting the hard fact that it was the elderly who were most vulnerable to the pandemic). I note that the restriction on travel actually prohibited her from attending her father's funeral. From "Laksa Cantata", tenor Samuel Ng portrayed Stephen working out at home, lifting weights and practicing *muay thai* as he rescheduled his wedding banquet, still working on surreptitiously sneaking *laksa* onto the menu (reflecting the reality that large gatherings were not allowed during that period). From "Window Shopping", soprano Phoebe Chee sang the part of the young Girl, now working from home and doing lots of virtual purchasing of essential and non-essential items such as new pair of fancy shoes, a jacket to look professional in teleconferencing, (reflecting the global reality the surge of e-commerce.) As discussed in one of many news reports (Chai 2019), "...retail therapy is also a way to get through these anxious times." Just as online shopping transcends geographical limits and boundaries, "A Singapore Trilogy" had effectively traversed the Singaporean local and the global by going virtual.

⁶⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF1TtLSkq6E> accessed Oct. 15, 2020.

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