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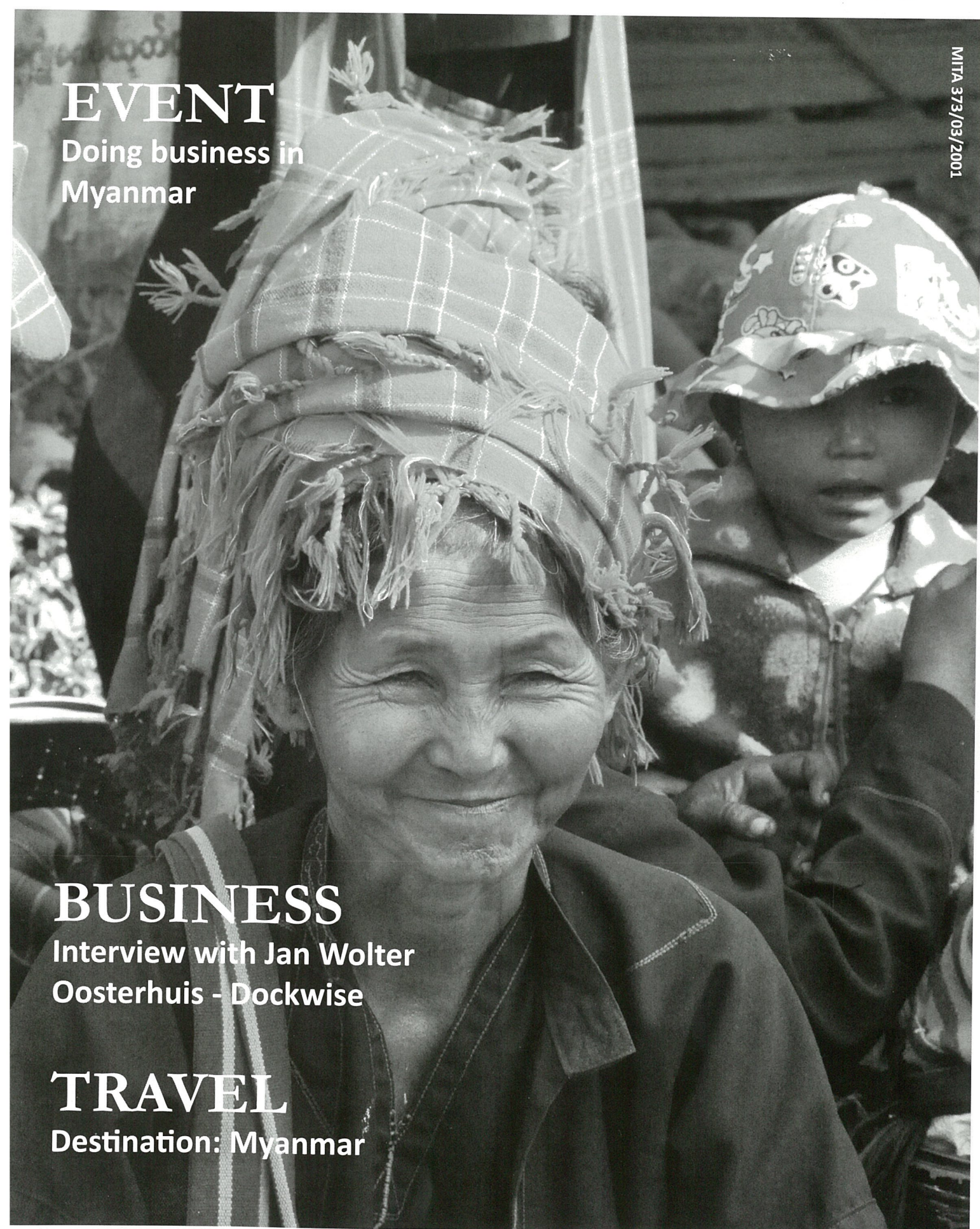
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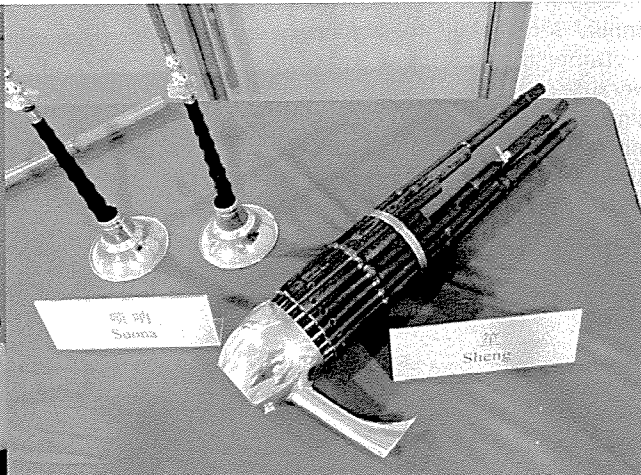
Destination: Myanmar



SINGAPORE CHINESE ORCHESTRA

A PEEP BEHIND THE SCENES

TEXT ALEID VAN DER SCHRIER PHOTOS LINEKE VAN NEDERPELT

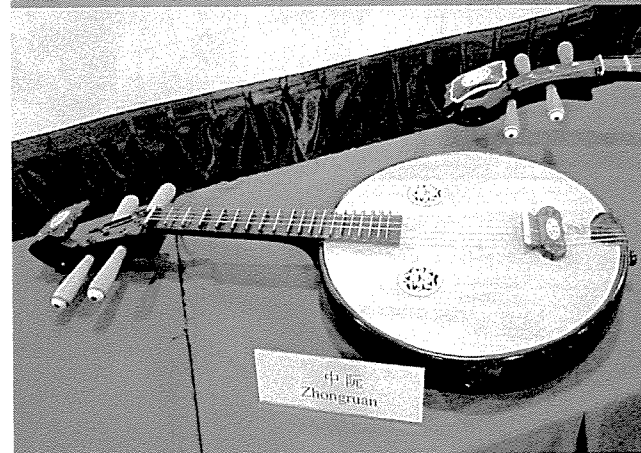
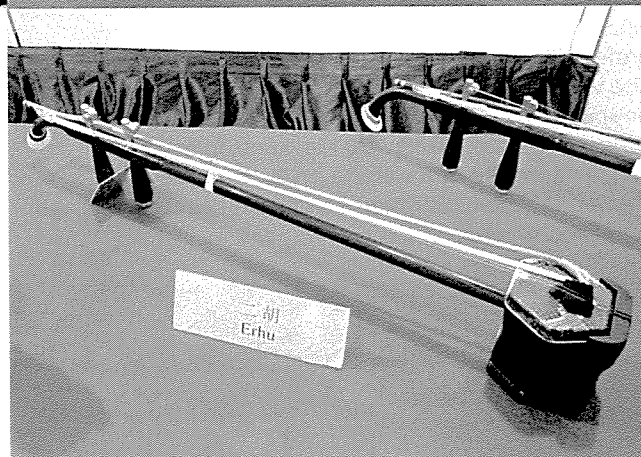


On April 15, around 50 ADB members paid a visit to the Singapore Chinese Orchestra at the Singapore Conference Hall, located in the Central Business District. It turned out to be an enchanting evening, filled with an interesting blend of Asian and Western music. And one thing is for sure, it made us curious for more!

The host of the evening was Ferry de Bakker, who volunteers as a consultant for SCO. The SCO was inaugurated in 1997 and is Singapore's only professional Chinese orchestra. It aspires to be a world renowned Chinese Orchestra with a uniquely Singaporean character. To achieve this, SCO is working on getting more international recognition. One way to do that is to invite different types of business groups to networking sessions, where SCO can present itself.

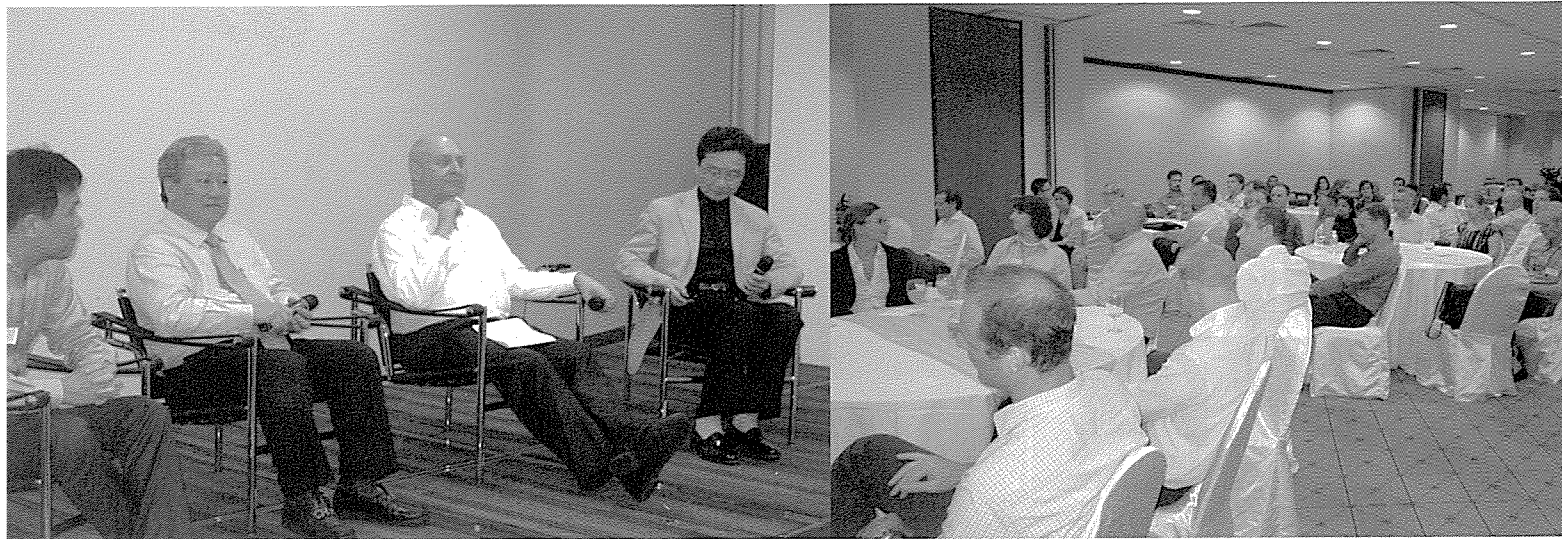
CHINESE CLASSICAL MUSIC AND INSTRUMENTS

The evening started with a presentation of Chinese classical music and instruments by Mr Quek Ling Kiong, resident conductor. In a Chinese orchestra, there are four groups of instruments: wind instruments, plucked string instruments, bowed string instruments and percussion instruments. The wind instruments contain amongst others the 'bangdi', which is a kind of bamboo flute, the 'suona', also called a Chinese trumpet and a 'sheng', which is an ancient Chinese instrument, made of several small pipes, similar to an organ. The plucked string instruments are unique to a Chinese orchestra and are played by using the fingers. The 'yangqin' is a kind of laying harp, while the 'quzheng', which has 21 strings, is the Chinese harp. This section also consists of different string instruments of different sizes, including the 'pipa', the 'ruan' and the 'sanxian'. The largest section in a Chinese orchestra is the bowed string instrument section, which makes up 50% of the orchestra. In this section there are two Western instruments, the cello and the double bass. The Chinese instruments are the



gaoju, the erhu and the zhonghu, which all look the same, but have a different tonal range. The last section consists of the percussion instruments.

During the presentation, 'You Tube' videos of SCO performances were shown to illustrate the above-mentioned instruments. When I heard the music of SCO, I was amazed. It did not sound like Chinese opera and it did not sound like Western classical music. It sounded like



fusion. By combining Chinese and Western instruments and by recomposing scores from Western and Asian composers, SCO has created its own unique sound that is easy to relate to.

When the sounds of SCO's music faded, Mr Patrick Goh, the director of SCO, took the floor. He passionately explained that the Chinese Orchestra only has a 60 year history. Although Chinese music is at least 5,000 years old, it was mainly written for solo instruments. With the gradual opening up of China after World War II, composers started to put the solo instruments together in works for orchestras.

Mr Goh also explained that it is very expensive to maintain an orchestra. The expenses are around \$14 million per year. Currently, the SCO has 78 full time musicians. They perform in 110 concerts yearly. "But", Mr Goh added, "The income from ticket sales is never enough to cover the costs." In addition to the concerts, the musicians also perform in smaller groups at schools, hospitals and community centres. In this way they bring music to all people.

RUNNING A NON-PROFIT ORGANISATION

The next item on the agenda was a presentation by Mr Terence Ho, who is the general manager of SCO. He manages 40 administrative staff and has 121 people on the pay-roll. Of the total expenditure of SCO, around 70% is covered by government grants.

In the organisational structure, SCO looks more like a private company than a non-profit organisation. First of all, there is a board of directors, who are volunteers, appointed by the minister. They serve a 2 year term. The directors decide on the strategy for SCO, while the management team operates the orchestra. Supporting the management team is a large number of committees, such as the artistic committee, the audit committee, the finance committee, the human resource committee and the marketing & sponsorship committee.

Mr Ho compared running a non-profit organisation with his favourite pastime, running. With an average mileage of 2,500km per year he is an expert runner. And as he said, "Running speeds you up, age slows you down". So, you really have to keep running when you are managing a non-profit organisation.

Next, Mr Ho introduced us to the dreams, inspiration, imagination and aspirations of SCO. Their aspirations

cover 8 dimensions, which are audience, brand, employer, management, music, musicians, orchestra and place. These dimensions should work together to deliver the desired outcomes, which are artistic excellence and international stature; broader audience base and more sophisticated demand; organisational excellence and financial stability. And just like private companies, these desired outcomes are measured using key performance indicators, for example, number of commissioned and arranged works, number of ticketed performances, number of internships or earned income excluding grants.

PANEL DISCUSSION

After this quick introduction to SCO we were given the opportunity to put all our burning questions to a panel, consisting of Mr Patrick Goh, Maestro Tsung Yeh (music director), Mr Terence Ho and Mr Ferry de Bakker.

Where are the compositions sourced, given the short history of Chinese Orchestras?

Of course, there is a lot of material from the 5,000 year long history of China. These scores are being used as a basis for compositions. There are a lot of composers from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore and even the UK. Western composers are flown in to Singapore to learn about the Chinese instruments, so that they are able to include these instruments in their compositions. In addition to that, SCO has its own scores library, which contains more than 8,000 pieces. Local Chinese orchestras (more than 200!) source from this library.

What percentage of the musicians are locals?

Most of the musicians are Singaporean or naturalised Singaporean, just a small percentage have a work pass or are permanent residents.

Where do you source your musicians?

In Singapore Chinese instruments are very popular. The huge number of local orchestras provides an enormous source of talented musicians. For auditions, SCO normally attracts three to four hundred candidates. SCO also operates the Singapore Chinese Youth Orchestra (SCYO), which currently consists of 98 musicians.

How are scores that were written for individual instruments adapted to scores for a complete orchestra?

Meastro Tsung explained that in the 50's a traditional melody was taken, which was combined with a western, functional melody. In the 70's and 80's more sophisticated techniques were used to blend Eastern and Western compositions. Singapore developed its own blend, which today is known by the name of 'Nanyang flavour'. Another source of compositions is the composition competitions, which were held in 2006 and 2011.

Does SCO perform internationally and does this add to the income stream?

Yes, SCO performs internationally. Over the past few years there have been performances in Europe (Budapest, London, Newcastle, Paris), Taiwan and China. The tour to Edinburgh, where SCO performed at the Edinburgh Music Festival, was very special, because SCO was the first Asian orchestra ever to be invited to this festival. Normally, SCO gets invited to ethnic or folk festivals, but this invitation made clear that SCO is now considered a mainstream orchestra.

Of course, these international concerts help to introduce SCO to a broader audience. However, the fees for these concerts cannot make up for the costs of the trips. Usually the Singapore government supports the musicians by covering their travel costs.

LIVE PERFORMANCES

The evening was concluded by an introduction to the

four groups of Chinese instruments. First, the sheng (mouth organ) was played, followed by the erhu (string instrument). Then a dazzling performance on the zhongruan (kind of guitar) was given, expressing a sword fight. A powerful drum (percussion) ended the introduction and made the Singapore Conference Hall shake to its foundations. Last but not least, the 'Fantastic 4' treated us to a combined performance, leaving us with a good impression of what SCO and its music is about.

EXPERIENCING THE SCO NANYANG FLAVOUR

Curious for more? As Mr Goh stated in his introduction, "The only way to experience the excitement of the instruments is to visit a concert." More information on SCO can be found on their website, but Mr Ho pointed out that SCO also has its own app, available for free from the App Store. The app contains information on SCO, the performance calendar, free music downloads and you can even book tickets for the performances via the app, which directs you automatically to the Sistic website. There is only one way to experience the SCO 'Nanyang flavour'- book a ticket, sit down and enjoy. Try it!

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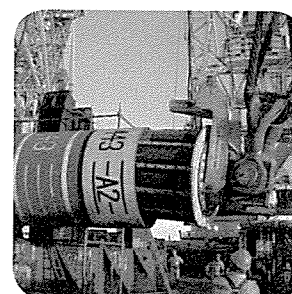
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