

Classical Music in Singapore: Possibilities for a Golden Age, and How to Realise Them

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Introduced to Singapore in the 1800s by colonialism, Western classical music in Singapore reached a pivotal milestone with the founding of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra in 1979. Since then, the orchestra has grown in professionalism, excellence and esteem, alongside significant growth in the nation's Western classical music audienceship, musicianship, and education. Confident in the future of Singapore's Western classical music scene, Goh Yew Lin, Chairman of the Singapore Symphony Group, offers four recommendations that will be critical to propel it into an era of unprecedented success.

Excellence in Challenging Times

Classical music in Singapore is in a very good place today, and its future is bright. This is in stark contrast to some Western cities where a sense of crisis has been growing for some time. The symptoms are varied: diminishing and aging audiences, funding cuts eating into the capacity for artistic ambition, curatorial confusion because of shifting societal priorities, declining music literacy because of changes in school curricula.

Artists visiting Singapore often comment that our audiences are so young, and so engaged. Indeed they are: the average age of a person buying a Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) subscription concert ticket has dropped to under 45, the average attendance at SSO concerts hit a record 93% in 2024, and we have had up to 10,000 people at the Botanic

Gardens concerts, testing the physical limits of the space around Symphony Lake. Beyond the SSO, there are now many non-professional ensembles performing at a standard that the SSO itself could not have attained in its first decade; choral, chamber music and early music groups are growing in ambition and quality; young Singaporean composers and performers are making their mark internationally; and we have a burgeoning calendar of recitals presented by entrepreneurial impresarios.

Early Roots and Long-Term Vision

The formation of the SSO in 1979 was *the* pivotal event in Singapore's classical music history. For the first time, Singapore had a core of salaried, professional musicians performing a year-long schedule of concerts, while teaching and inspiring the next generation of musicians.

Dr Goh Keng Swee had declared in 1974 that it was a “scandal” that Singapore did not have a professional orchestra, and it was he who put together a team and persuaded his Cabinet colleagues to invest in the creation of a national orchestra. From the start, however, it was recognised that this had to go beyond just an orchestra; we needed to build audiences and a supportive ecosystem for music to thrive.

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's speech¹ at the opening of the renovated Victoria Concert Hall (VCH) in October 1980 is riveting and revealing.

I'll highlight two important points. First, it was already recognised in 1980 that the newly-renovated

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VCH was too small for a full orchestra. It still is. The SSO then had 52 members, and it was estimated that this number would grow to more than 70 in a decade, by which time a full-sized concert hall would need to be built. This need was met only with the completion of the Concert Hall at Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay in 2002.

Second, Mr Lee spoke at length about why Singapore was unlikely to produce enough world-class musicians to populate a whole orchestra (at the time, there were seven Singaporeans out of 52). At one level, this was a statement about avoiding chauvinistic thinking—if there weren’t enough Singaporeans of requisite standard, then we had to be open to inviting excellent foreign musicians to fill the gaps and sink their roots here. But the more important implication was that, even in 1980 and with all the financial constraints of that time, they were planning for the eventuality of a world-class orchestra, inspiring young musicians to ever higher standards, to perform in a modern concert hall and tour internationally as the country’s cultural ambassadors.

Dr Goh and his team were tough on financial discipline, but also generous in planting the seeds for future excellence. They didn’t take the easy route, and supported founding Music Director Choo Hoey’s missionary zeal. Choo forged his orchestra with a challenging repertoire, frequently exposing

audiences to music far beyond their comfort zones. When given the opportunity to make a 10th anniversary recording for Philips, Choo Hoey chose Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony—according to some, a gnarly portrait of Stalin by a composer who had suffered much under his rule.

To expose students to orchestral music and help build the long-term pipeline of professional musicians, the Singapore Youth Orchestra (now the Singapore National Youth Orchestra) was formed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 1980 (after which it came under SSO management in 2016). MOE also offered many scholarships for talented musicians to study at the world’s best conservatories, the best of them coming back to form the core of the SSO. In the same spirit, the decision would be taken two decades later to form what is now the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at the National University of Singapore which, together with the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, continues to add annually to the pool of talented musicians bringing much vibrancy to the entire music ecosystem. More broadly, MOE’s school curriculum plays a major role in the cultivation of music literacy in our youth; it is in school that life-long foundations for music appreciation are laid, and the SSO has worked closely with MOE to expose students to the excitement and breadth of classical music.

I've been involved with the SSO since a year after its founding, when at the age of 21 I found myself pronouncing on its concerts as music critic for *The Straits Times*. After a few years abroad, I came back to make my career as a stockbroker, and was invited to join the SSO's board in 1990, becoming its Deputy Chairman in 2002 and Chairman in 2010. I was also the founding chairman of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music from 2002 to 2017. It has truly been a privilege to help shape these two pillars of the classical music ecosystem.

Drawing on these experiences, I suggest a few recommendations that both build on our strong foundations and continue taking the Singaporean classical music scene to new heights.

RECOMMENDATION 01:

Stay focused on the prime objective: to build one of the world's great orchestras

When the SSO first performed at London's Royal Festival Hall in 2010, one critic (*The Spectator's* Damian Thomson) asked whether this could be one of the 21st century's great orchestras in the making. He was clearly impressed, but while he saw both potential and ambition, he implied we weren't quite there yet. It was, I think, a fair assessment of the SSO in 2010.

I have frequently borrowed from that *Spectator* review to frame what I think *should* be the SSO's

prime objective: to build, for and in Singapore, one of the world's great orchestras. Everything else derives from having an inspiring core of excellence: music education, effective outreach, national pride, international recognition and cultural diplomacy, and a vibrant and growing ecosystem of music-making in Singapore.

Today, the SSO is recognised as one of Singapore's success stories: an orchestra that has earned standing ovations on tours to Berlin, London and Dresden, and been ranked by *BBC Music Magazine* as being among the best in the world—one of only two from Asia on the list when it was first published.² Some of our recordings for international labels have reached Top 10 ranks on classical music charts in the United Kingdom and United States.

Why does it matter whether the SSO aspires to higher peaks of excellence? Could we not say to ourselves that the status quo is already good enough?

We don't really have a choice. Audiences are increasingly discerning, and demand quality. Many are well-travelled and have heard great orchestras in their home halls. In an increasingly digital age, everyone has access to concerts streamed from the best in the world. Live concerts must deliver a degree of technical excellence, excitement and emotional engagement that is comparable, if not superior, to the virtual alternative.

Excellence in orchestras results from many factors coming together to deliver a total experience that stirs hearts and minds. Some elements are subjective, but many are matters of professional competence, such as the technical limits and expressive capacity of individual players. Wise professional judgement and strong artistic leadership are essential in building an orchestra.

At a pivotal point in the SSO's history, after the 2010 London concert, we turned to two leading orchestra managers from Germany and the United Kingdom to provide feedback on what we needed to do better, and how. Their frank opinions went on to shape a strategy paper that guided us well for the next decade.

Each person (including music critics) responds to a concert from a perspective shaped by prior experience and affected by their present emotional state. I have lost count of the number of times an audience has been enraptured by a concert that the conductor (and often the musicians) felt was a poor reflection of what they could have done. This self-aware hunger to improve is to be cherished. Conversely, we have to guard against complacency, however tempting that may be: that way lies mediocrity.

Singapore is one of the world's great cities, and we should aspire to build an orchestra that music lovers from other great cities like New York, London, or Tokyo would fly huge distances to come and listen to. That, I think, is an achievable goal as we continue to build the SSO, and to position Singapore as an international centre for great music-making.

RECOMMENDATION 02:

Build a second full-size concert hall within the next decade

The SSO is the largest user of the Esplanade Concert Hall, but it still performs many concerts

at the VCH, which even in 1980 was understood to be too small acoustically for a full symphony orchestra. The SSO's standards rose noticeably after the opening of the Esplanade in 2002 because the musicians were finally able to work in an acoustic environment which allowed them more latitude in expressive range, and to better hear and respond to each other.

In earlier years, the SSO kept to a routine of one iteration per Esplanade concert, except for occasional gala events; it was felt that audience numbers could not yet support repeat concerts. Today, with average attendance at 93% and many concerts selling out, the SSO needs to step up to doing two, if not more, iterations on a more regular basis. This is the norm for any major orchestra; many American orchestras play each programme up to four times, allowing continuing refinement of the ensemble across a run of concerts.

The good news is that there is now substantial demand for the Esplanade Concert Hall. Singapore's music ecosystem has grown, and the Esplanade curates a rich and diverse calendar of concerts and events. Unfortunately, this means that, even with the greatest goodwill, there probably will not be enough dates available for the SSO's programmes as its needs increase over the next decade.

The Esplanade was planned around 1996, when the population of Singapore was 3.67 million. We now have six million people. This increased density is part of the reason our halls are full, but it also provides grounds for optimism that demand for live music will be sufficiently robust to justify a second world-class concert hall.

RECOMMENDATION 03:

Dedicate Victoria Concert Hall as a forum for recitals, chamber and vocal music, prioritising excellence in its core offerings

I have not said much so far about the classical music ecosystem beyond the SSO, even though much of it is very dear to my heart. The reason is that I believe a strong core is necessary to energise the whole, and if we get that core right, the rest of the ecosystem will blossom. In the Singaporean concert calendar today, there is already a richness of content, of musical talent, and of artistic ambition that bodes well for the future. However, consistent funding support from the National Arts Council will continue to be critical to the growth of these young ensembles.

I believe we should re-imagine the VCH as a home for recitals and small-ensemble performances, prioritising excellence so that VCH develops a reputation similar to that of Wigmore Hall in London. A well-curated VCH calendar will provide a healthy counterpoint to the orchestral offerings in the symphonic halls, and can be a consistent, high-quality and well-equipped venue that serves a different but no less important segment of music lovers and music makers.

RECOMMENDATION 04:

Build quality performing spaces in heartland parks

Up to 10,000 visitors have thronged the Botanic Gardens to hear the SSO. There is clearly popular demand for such park concerts, but at present there are only two venues where outdoor concerts are presented with any frequency: the Botanic Gardens, and Gardens by the Bay.

It is time for us to create similar performing spaces in places such as Jurong, Bedok and Woodlands, with permanent sound systems and onstage climate control. This would bring the best of Singaporean music to the people, and create focal points for communities to come together. The SSO can play its part, but such spaces should also serve performing groups cutting across musical and ethnic genres, allowing for the curation of a diverse year-long season that resonates with all heartlanders. It would also allow performers to prepare one programme for presentation across multiple venues, magnifying the impact of their current efforts.

Concluding Thoughts

Three of my four recommendations for the classical music ecosystem focus on building or repurposing performance spaces. I put these thoughts forward to kindle a debate on

long-term structural needs, because I am fundamentally optimistic about the continuing growth in audience numbers. This is partly a consequence of escalating performance quality, which in turn partly builds on big structural and policy decisions made 25-30 years ago—such as to build the Esplanade, to set up a high-quality Conservatory, to actively build the public's appreciation of the arts. The number and quality of music-makers in Singapore has burgeoned as a consequence.

From the early history of the SSO, we can see that decisions were taken with the expectation that a better orchestra would catalyse performing standards, generate bigger audiences, and eventually justify investment in a better concert hall. Long-term consequences were kept clearly in mind, with unstinting focus on excellence as a guiding objective.

In focusing on hardware, I don't mean that things are perfect on the software side; indeed, there is potential for greater ambition to make Singapore a key hub in different musical genres. However, the quality and variety of ensembles and programmes that have emerged in the past decade give me much hope. I am also thrilled by the new chapter that will unfold at the SSO, with the appointment of Finnish conductor, Hannu Lintu, as Music Director for the 2026/2027 season.

In short, I believe that we stand at the cusp of a Golden Age for classical music in Singapore, if we keep our focus on nurturing excellence, and continue our heritage of building confidently for the future. □

About the Author



Goh Yew Lin has been engaged with Singapore's arts scene since 1980, when he landed a freelance role as music critic for *The Straits Times* a year after the formation of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO). He continued to contribute a classical music column till 1997. In 1990, he joined the board of the SSO, which he now chairs; he has also served two six-year terms on the National Arts Council. In 1994, he helped found the Singapore International Piano Festival, and was also the founding chairman of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music. His business interests are completely unrelated to the arts, and he is currently chairman of Duke-NUS Medical School and a board member of the Agency for Science, Technology and Research.

Notes

1. The full speech can be accessed at <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/lky19801001.pdf>.
2. The full ranking is available at <https://www.classical-music.com/articles/worlds-best-orchestras>.