

NATIONAL MUSIC DAY 2023 : ARE WE BETTER THAN IN 2022 ?

by Ananda Sukarlan

If you google "classical music is", google will automatically continue with their three most searched words: "dying" , "for snobs" and "boring". This may be the most 3 top searched words in Europe or the USA, but let's check the facts. For example, I am sure you all know the town Salzburg or the country Finlandia. Now, what automatically connect us with those two names? The first would be Mozart, and the second Sibelius. Two icons of classical music separated 100 years apart. Their names are used for chocolates and also a beautiful park with Sibelius monument in Helsinki. Now THAT'S the power of classical music. I believe if a country is a shop, its artistic product is the shop window. Mention Florence and we immediately think of its great paintings, mention Barcelona and we think of its buildings by the architect Antoni Gaudi.



Sometimes art looks as if it is cheap, and we even give it for free, as we can see and listen now through social media. But we all know, when a product is free, then the consumer is the product. Art is one of the most powerful means to introduce our country to the outside world. A way to attract tourists and investors, if we want to connect it economically, but also simply it is a way to make friends and diplomatic relationships. Last but not least, music education should be the basic of all education.

I believe that music is a universal language because it can connect to our emotions directly, bypassing the mind almost entirely. Also, the inherent mathematical structure of music can easily cross cultural barriers as well. But things are not so simple.

Music as a medium of expression is universal the same way spoken language as a medium of communication is universal. Just like languages which vary from similar dialects to virtually mutually unintelligible languages, music of various cultures and various styles are not readily accessible and understood by everybody. Also cultural conditioning and assimilation is essential if someone wants to speak an accent-free language as a native or like a native. The same goes with music. The so called Western classical music is only a form of music. It is now widespread in the world thanks to centuries of western colonization and modern media. I, as a musician deeply rooted in the western tradition, can often hear a foreign "accent" when western classical music is performed by musicians who come from countries far removed from the west, or western performers no longer in touch with the traditional styles of performance.

It is neither a bad thing nor a good thing per se. It's like listening to CNN International, TVRI World or Al Jazeera where almost every reporter has a foreign accent. Is it noticeable? Yes! Is it distracting? Not really! But of course, the most fluent reporter is still the one talking and expressing in his own mother tongue.

In any case, music is like a foreign language. You need to learn the notes like you learn the alphabet. Then you study the grammar, and then try to speak it or write in it. If you want to learn a new language you have to start from scratch again. The same with music. In order to sit through a 3-hour long Italian as well as Chinese opera, and to truly enjoy it, an open disposition won't be enough.

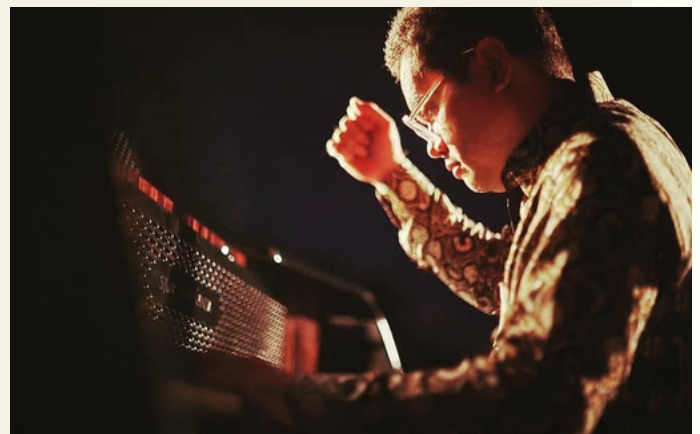
You will need to know much about the style and culture. And to give a believable performance of it, you need much more than that. You need to have fully assimilated the Chinese culture and language. Otherwise, your performance will always have that foreign accent which on this particular case may distract the listener. And that is why Indonesian musicians need Indonesian classical music in order to present ourselves in the international forum. We can't compete with those international musicians performing Mozart and Beethoven, our "foreign accent" will always be revealed. We perform the best music of our heritage, although using western instruments and even western techniques.

Indonesian classical music does not really exist, because we have great diversity of ethnic cultures. Or shall I rephrase it: Indonesian classical music exists BECAUSE of our diversity. That's why it's so difficult to pinpoint how Indonesian classical music sounds, since an influence from a West or South Sumatran ethnic music could be so different than one influenced by ethnic music of, say, Java or Bali. But in the end it is the composer's identity and particular character that produces music that is characteristically Indonesian. The same happens with all the countries outside Europe. Even the continent of America didn't have their classical music until the birth of the music by Louis Moreau Gottschalk, Edward MacDowell, Charles Ives in the USA, and then to the south with Heitor Villa Lobos (Brazil), Carlos Chavez (Mexico), Alberto Ginastera (Argentina) etc.

That is why we outside Europe can see the whole panorama of classical music objectively, as if observing a city from the top of the mountain further away, or looking at a forest from a helicopter because we are not inside that city or jungle. We can then reproduce or recreate our own city or jungle, or even a city with a jungle! Will it be artificial? You may of course judge it as such, but that's why we can make it better, since we learn what we should (not) do with the way it is managed, promoted and programmed. Not only that, we can adapt it to our own cultural background and artistic traditions.

Last year, Indonesia held the G20 Presidency, and the Ministry of Culture grabbed that opportunity to create the most diverse orchestra in the world. The G20 Orchestra, a newly founded orchestra by Indonesia that chaired 2022's G20 Presidency, consists of the best young musicians from the 20 countries of the G20, and they were featured in its world premiere at the Borobudur Temple in Magelang, Central Java, on Sep 12, 2022.

Indonesia has started establishing its identity in classical music, and this is what our G20 orchestra is presenting to you today.



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The G20 Orchestra has become Indonesia's legacy for the group of the world's 20 largest economies, it is a disruption in the classical music world with its gender equality and youthfulness. Our target of equaling the number of men and women was only slightly off to 34 male and 26 female. Also, the players are all born in or after 1990, so we can call it a "millennial" orchestra.

I deliberately chose only masterpieces to be performed for the world premiere of the G20 Orchestra, whose mission is to apply and spread the values of the Indonesian concept Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity), gender diversity, anti-violence and anti-war movement, support and empowerment of persons with disabilities, and the unity of G20 countries in the spirit of "Recover Together, Recover Stronger." Furthermore, we hope that the G20 Orchestra will continue as chamber music groups as well as this year during the G20 Presidency of India to keep the spirit alive.



Ananda Sukarlan is a composer & pianist. He was bestowed the highest knighthood "Cavaliere Ordine della Stella d'Italia" by the President Sergio Mattarella. In 2020 he was elected as the President of the Jury for the Queen Sofia Award in Spain, the biggest competition for new composers in Europe.

Sydney Morning Herald has written that he is "one of the world's leading pianist at the forefront of championing new piano music". His celebrated musical works include a series of more than 40 "Rapsodia Nusantara" for piano solo, all based on folk melodies from different regions throughout Indonesia. He also wrote orchestral works, operas, works for choirs and a quantity of music for chamber groups.