

Encountering Ethnicity: Forging a Transcultural Singapore Sound

An Essay on the Musical Art Performance:

ETHNI-CITY II – Converging Cultures

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While studying music and living in Melbourne, Australia the past four years, the most common question I was frequently asked is “What is the music of Singapore?”. I would often throw the question back to the curious inquirer in the hope that I did not have to answer. Why? Because I am ashamed that I know so much about the history and evolution of Western music but not the music of my own country and culture. But what exactly is the sound of my culture? What is Singaporean music? And if there is one, how does it shape and change our collective identity? Just like some of us who were born in Singapore but grew up influenced by the West, I am unexposed to the rich history of the diverse musical ethnicity of our heritage and this place we call home. Yet what makes Singapore, Singapore? These are questions that continue to frame this response. I raise questions rather than provide answers in this preliminary exploration of the performance and theory.

I attempted to recall early moments encountering ethnic music and instead found that it was migrant’s music I had found some eight years ago in a quaint shop house tucked away along Campbell lane in Singapore’s Little India. It was called Indian Classical Music Centre, a music shop and school specializing in traditional Hindustani music. I entered and had a short chat with whom I thought was the owner due to the stack of CDs neatly placed

outside the store bearing his name and photo on the cover. He was seated comfortably on the carpeted floor with a Sitar in hand and microphones set up around him in this tiny shop space. His name is Ustad Sharafat Khan, a multi-instrumentalist of traditional Indian instruments born in North India who moved to Singapore in 1986 to promote Indian music and culture. He and his music then became a part of Singapore and influenced the Indian music community. This was a significant milestone in my musical journey as I started to become more aware of my own musical identity and how it is shaped by my environment, culture and beliefs. Perhaps that is what the Singapore Sound is: A mix of all.

ETHNI-CITY II – Converging Cultures (2015) was more than just a performance, it marked the beginning of a new symbiosis within the artistic community and our multicultural society as a whole. I believe it demonstrates the harmony of the cultures through creativity and open-mindedness that is unrestricted and holds no boundaries. Just like the first *ETHNI-CITY* (2014) performance, *ETHNI-CITY II* brought an entropic dynamism, crossing cultures and unifying energies into a new realm of contemporary sound unique to multicultural Singapore.

This music is new to my ears and I am guessing to many others who are more familiar with popular culture or contemporary music. It is filled with well-balanced textures churned by the various ethnic and Western instruments in constant flux. The first thought that came to mind as I started watching the performance was if it were going to be another one of those experimental-fusion type gigs where the musicians improvised the whole way through. This was not the case. The performance unfolded in a structured narrative, starting with introductions by the three ethnic trios (and guests) separately

followed by various combinations of them. I sometimes lost myself within the convergence of sounds as they became somewhat meditative, maybe lacking a generic pulse or sometimes dissonant in quality. This does not last long as the performance operates in blocks, changing unexpectedly from one event to another and in this case, these blocks of sound were drastically different from one another. This caught my attention and before long I was unknowingly looking forward to the unfolding of the next event. The larger size of the ensemble (made up of eleven musicians) led me to doubt its cohesiveness and harmony especially when dealing with other ethnical textures. However, the musical fluctuations mixed well with adequate space given to the musicians to grow and evolve as the performance went on, despite their instrument's unusual timbre. I do not believe in mistakes personally, especially in music, as it deters you from enjoying the performance and the process of learning. It is unnecessary fear, though I can understand if the rhythm section thought otherwise, toward the enjoyment of performing together. As the great Miles Davis once said, "Do not fear mistakes. There are none."

Even though the musicians are highly proficient at their own instruments, working together to unify as one would be the biggest challenge. As mentioned before, the blocks of events allow a catalytic flow of fluctuating qualities. This gives the musicians time to readjust and adapt to the following event, giving time and space to each other to listen and react. For example, there were times in the performance where the drums create the pulse for the rest of the group to catch onto and layer their own texture above. Even from the rehearsal stage, the musicians had to train themselves to listen and know when to stop and when to play.

Another interesting thing I observed was the use of voice and Western instruments apart from the traditional ethnic ones such as the Violin, Accordion, Drum Kit etc. as well as other electronic elements. The voices sang traditional languages which to me, sounded like another ethnic instrument. They were all unique qualities on their own but when put together, like at the end of the performance, emanated trans-meditative harmonies that concluded the performance beautifully. I was intrigued by the use of western Instruments in such a performance context as it not only tied the ethnic instruments together but also introduced a new approach to diversifying the ethnical sound. I believe electronics were also used to enhance the instruments. Spatial and time based effects such as reverb and delay were used, while extended techniques such as using the violin bow on an alternative string instrument such as the Guzheng produced a new texture. This new approach is particularly attractive to people who have thought ethnic music to be of a certain sound, therefore this fusion appeals to more Westernized audiences. However on the other end of the spectrum, audiences who are purists and are used to traditional ethnic music might not take this synthesis too well, which might result in a loss of audience support. With *ETHNI-CITY II*, I personally feel there is balance between these differing sound qualities, which not only support each other but also blend strikingly well together. An example from the performance would be the standard Western drum grooves played in unison with the odd time signatures of the Tabla and Indian double-ended drum rhythms.

To find that unifying one sound, two keywords came to mind after watching the full performance – Experimentation and Collaboration. Each person involved in this project brought a distinct musical and cultural identity, paired with experience, into the group. I believe this identity is altered dynamically

by choice when shifted into a new group context particularly made up of different ethnicity and background. As Dr Lucy Green, Professor of Music Education at the UCL Institute of Education, UK, argued "...an individual begins to acquire a musical identity, or rather several musical identities, which are liable to develop and change over time." (Green, 2011, p.1) Just like musical identity, I believe that cultural identity is also shaped by personal choice as "...sharing an identity suggest[s] some *active* engagement on our part." (Woodward, 2000, p. 6, emphasis in original)

Experimentation and collaboration, with none being more important than the other, work hand in hand. I believe the collaboration came first as the decision to work and create together is fundamentally the cornerstone of this project. The three different trios, SA(三) (Chinese), OrkeStar Trio (Malay) and Tamarind Sound Project (Indian) fittingly represent the three major ethnic groups of Singapore. The rest of the group, percussionist Nizar Fauzi and Ramu Thiruyanam, who are both Malay and Indian respectively, bring about their own solo ethnic experience to the group.

This eclectic cultural collaboration was united in search of a singular binding distinctiveness - The Singapore identity. As described by Natalie and Raga in the dialogue session, the musical group came together to create something from scratch to ultimately forge a Singapore identity through music. The purpose was to develop the ethnic music scene, not separated by racial differences, together as one identity. This collaboration was a musical journey and from what I have gathered whilst hearing the music, represented a process. "Simply put, identity is a sense of belonging. Constructing an identity is very much a *process*..." (Ho, 2012, p. 49, emphasis in original). I believe this process of construction is evident in the performance as I felt the

unfamiliarity and doubt, as heard from the first segment, began to fuse into a holistic mixture of the varying timbres in the last. The performers were not only fusing their individual voices through this collaboration, they were also building a unifying identity amongst not just themselves but also amongst the various ethnic communities. This bond between the musicians automatically transfers to their families and peers who see and hear of what they do. Therefore, the music acts as a bridge.

This was not an easy feat as it took a lot of planning, experimentation, interaction and compromise as mentioned in the dialogue session. Apart from music, the musicians had to observe each other's background and ethnic rituals, respecting cultural ground rules and personal beliefs. This outward respect influences their inner being that ultimately transfers to the music. Though the musicians had their own thought of either naming or not naming the kind of music they were playing, their conviction for something greater and more united is distinct in throughout the group as it shows in the performance.

The experimentation of instruments and arrangement is key to finding the appropriate sound for use at a particular time. Many of these musicians are multi-instrumentalists equipped with an arsenal of instruments of varying timbres. The choice to therefore use a particular instrument at any one point had to be done during the experimentation stage of the project. Through trial and error, the musicians will then find out which instruments worked well together and which did not. It is about finding the right combinations to create new sounds. I am therefore more curious and interested in the rehearsals, which is the process, more than the actual performance, which is the final product.

Experimentation is also evident in the live performance as I could sense the space in which the musicians gave each other to interact and interpret. This act of listening and responding is vital in this context as the performance hinted elements of chance and improvisation atop the rehearsed arrangement. As mentioned by Nizar Fauzi in the dialogue session, the instruments were an extension of themselves and, much like themselves, were in constant “live” conversation with each other. An example would be mid-performance where the percussionists of various ethnic groups began to solo on their rhythmic instruments based on cues given to each other on the spot. This segment then ends beautifully when they stop together on the rehearsed cue of three counts. Within this percussive improvisation, the interaction and response were key to a cohesive whole.

This leads me to the importance of live performances for both performers and audiences in Singapore.

“Although the musical product yields its greatest source of income in recorded and written form, its authenticity, or validity, is very much dependent upon the music’s being on view in the live performance. In this context the musical product is being produced and consumed in the same moment; there is an inextricable association between the musician and his music.”
(White, 1978, p. 187)

Musicians are most sincere when performing live to an audience who not only cares to be there but also yearns for something they can take from that experience. I believe that in *ETHNI-CITY II* the musicians were offering their

collective synergy to the audiences whom I think were made up of ethnomusicologists, ethnologists and friends of the musicians. This collective synergy is only present in a live context and will be lost in any form of recording be it audio or video. This is due to the limited perspective of audio and video recordings, as they do not provide a multifaceted reading into the interaction of the live performance. Recordings cannot do ample justice to the intensity and identities formed between the respective musicians at that particular moment. In Singapore, where there is a lack of funding and public support, it is hard to have multiple runs of the same performance which I believe would be ideal. Live performances such as *ETHNI-CITY II* should be at the forefront of artistic change in our society. It not only helps to develop an identity but also exposes this unique sound beyond our nation and to the rest of the world. Although the live performance element is important, the circulation of audio and video recordings, especially in this technological age where viral media is at its peak, play an equally important role. The dissemination and marketing of such recordings shortens the time needed to reach a significant level of exposure. This develops curiosity and creates buzz within the various ethnic communities, which is vital in promoting this new music. Another way that might be effective in promoting the performance is the recording of the rehearsals in the form of a documentary. This offers the audience a glimpse and insight into the realness, attitudes and process the musicians had to go through to reach the final performance.

This new transcultural music continues to create awareness and change through continued exposure and support. It will shape generations to come as we build tolerance, harmony and openness to our cultures, which hopefully will transcend the ages and finally become the unique "Singapore Sound". However, this is but a tentative discussion of what Singaporean

music can be or is described. What is of significance is how we can move toward forging a united Singapore music identity through transcultural collaboration and how these performances ultimately shape our lives.

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