

life

D CULTURAL REVOLUTION PHOTOS
Photographer Li Zhensheng
hid prints under his
floorboards
D3

PRODIGY GROWS UP
Pianist Benjamin Boo
to play in Botanic
Gardens concert
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In tune with traditions

Young composers (from left) Syafiqah 'Adha Sallehin, Danial Ariffin Azman and Bakti Khair are behind upcoming performances breathing new life into traditional Malay arts and culture.
PHOTOS: AZMI ATHNI, COURTESY OF BENJAMIN BOO

Young Malay composers are not only preserving their traditions, but also reimagining and reinterpreting them.
Nabillah Said and Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh report

A small but growing number of young Malay music creators are looking to their roots and breathing new life into traditional Malay arts and culture.

From weaving in bits of Malay literature into their music, to bringing instruments from the East and West together, they are not just preserving their traditions, but also reimagining and reinterpreting them in contemporary pop and classical music.

Their efforts can be heard in two upcoming performances: B3 Concert by youth group Nusantara Arts on Saturday, and contemporary music and dance creation Ikan Girl on Oct 21 and 23.

Music and language will collide at Saturday's B3 Concert – which stands for Belia. Bahasa. Budaya, or Youth. Language. Culture – when nine Malay poems will be reinterpreted as musical compositions.

The show at the School of the Arts Concert Hall is a culmination of a three-month project done in conjunction with this year's Bulan Bahasa, or Malay Language Month. Winning entries from a poetry

competition for those aged 16 to 30 were handed to young composers Danial Ariffin Azman, Bakti Khair, Amni Musfirah and Zulkifli M. Amin, who wrote music based on them in a span of three weeks.

Nusantara Arts, says its artistic director Zulkifli, decided to merge poetry and music to get Malay literary enthusiasts and musicians here collaborating.

"Language is often misunderstood by those unfamiliar with Malay poetry, and music is often underappreciated," says Zulkifli, 33. "By combining these aspects and creating a refreshing approach, we want to see more people taking a step forward and contributing creative works to the scene."

The works will be performed by the group's ensemble, Nusantara, which showcases keroncong instruments such as the cak and the cuk, two ukulele-like instruments.

Keroncong is an Indonesian style of music, but Nusantara also features the piano, flute and saxophone.

Zulkifli, who has at least 150 compositions under his belt, is inspired by the structure, sounds and interlocking patterns of the gamelan orchestra.

"This has a deep impact on my compositions either by the use of gongs or mimicking gamelan music and its harmony," he says. "There's so much to discover in this region and every day is a new discovery."

Young Malay composers, he notes, tend to infuse elements of Malay music into their works – a

sign that they are keen on keeping the "culture going in their craft".

Says the Lasalle College of the Arts graduate: "There's always the stigma that the younger generation is more inclined to popular and mainstream music instead of traditional genres – probably due to the lack of exposure."

"It's a rich culture, but oftentimes the lack of understanding creates a barrier between the young and their heritage. I think from the involvement of youth in the arts and culture scene here, the setting up of musical groups, arts companies and events, we're on the right track. It's a healthy scene."

Meanwhile, coming up on Oct 21 and 23 is Ikan Girl, a multidisciplinary performance featuring an original composition by 26-year-old Syafiqah 'Adha Sallehin, accompanied by elements of traditional Malay dance, Bharatanatyam (traditional Indian dance from South India) and contemporary dance.

Ikan Girl is part of the Singapore International Festival of Music, which runs from Oct 13 to 30, and Syafiqah, who teaches music at the School of the Arts, is the festival's artist-in-residence this year.

The Oct 21 performance will be preceded by Portrait Of A Composer, with original compositions by Syafiqah performed by the festival ensemble.

On Oct 23, it will be preceded by Portrait Of A Virtuoso, with a recital by Syafiqah on the accordion and Nabillah Jalal on the piano.

Nabillah, 24, is the music director

of Ikan Girl. She recently completed her studies at London's Royal College of Music and returns to Singapore later this month.

Ikan Girl – or Fish Girl – is based on an 18th- or 19th-century Malay poem titled Syair Bidasari. It is about a girl, Bidasari, who has a soul linked to that of a fish.

The story is similar to that of fairy tale Snow White, with an evil queen who is jealous of Bidasari's beauty. Here, the queen takes the fish out of the water, which causes Bidasari to lose consciousness. She is eventually rescued by a prince.

For Ikan Girl, Syafiqah is working with The Bhumi Collective, an arts group which champions Malay traditional dance and music. Nabillah is one of its founders.

The music will be performed by what Syafiqah describes as a "standard Malay ensemble", comprising the accordion, flute and violin, as well as the piano and percussion instruments.

She adds: "The music is a fusion of contemporary and tradition. I used not only rhythms from Malay music that go together with the Malay dance repertoire, for example, the joget, but I also used contemporary sound colours."

For example, to produce scenes of excitement or anger, the musicians might play their instruments in unconventional ways, such as producing screeching sounds on a violin or a harsh note on the flute.

"I hope audiences will be open-minded, especially those who don't usually listen to classical music. It

will be an eye-opener for them," says Syafiqah.

Nabillah and Syafiqah maintain that the piece has a relatable story with Bidasari, which was made into a black-and-white film in 1965, starring Jins Shamsuddin and Sarimah.

"There is a certain 'Melayuness' to it, which will be a starting point for people to understand that classical music is not elitist, but very accessible," says Nabillah.

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BOOK IT / B3 CONCERT

WHERE: School Of The Arts Concert Hall, 1 Zubir Said Drive
WHEN: Saturday, 8pm
ADMISSION: \$35 from www.nstarts.sg/btiga-tix

BOOK IT / IKAN GIRL

WHERE: Chamber, The Arts House, 1 Old Parliament Lane
WHEN: Oct 21 (with Portrait Of A Composer) and 23 (with Portrait Of A Virtuoso), 7.30pm
ADMISSION: \$36 from Sistic (call 6348-5555 or go to www.sistic.com.sg)
INFO: www.sifom-sg.com

Five young Malay composers

1

SYAFIQAH 'ADHASALLEHIN, 26

From age four till 16, Syafiqah 'Adha Sallehin was exposed to Western classical music through her piano lessons.

But finding herself with free time after her O levels, she decided to join the Orkestra Melayu Singapura, which preserves and promotes traditional Malay music in Singapore.

Around the same time, her father, a fan of Malay keroncong music, bought her an accordion.

"He wanted me to try it out. I guess because it looks like a piano," she says with a laugh.

Syafiqah, whose father is a technical officer and mother a housewife, is the third of four children.

It took her six months to learn to play the instrument.

She would play it every week at weddings and events with Gendang Akustika, a traditional Malay music ensemble she joined in 2009. She also arranges music for the group.

She mostly plays the accordion now. Syafiqah is a teacher at the School of the Arts' music faculty and works on music composition commissions.

She is not only the first Malay student to do a bachelor's in music at the National University of Singapore's Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, but also the school's first master's student in 2014.

For her master's, she wrote a contemporary composition with narration based on the story of Singapura Dilanggar Todak, a local legend about a swordfish attack.

Syafiqah says she is pushing the boundaries even further with her new contemporary creation, Ikan Girl, based on an epic poem, Syair Bidasari.

The work is part of the Singapore International Festival of Music and she says she is "overwhelmed and delighted" to be its artist-in-residence.

"It's an opportunity to make a statement that Malay music can still be explored. I hope this craft can be developed further."

She wishes to set up an academy for people to deepen their knowledge of Malay music.

She also dreams of inspiring greater appreciation for classical music among the Malay community and hopes parents would encourage their children to learn other instruments besides the piano and violin.

Using herself as an example, she says: "At least the accordion didn't go to waste."

Nabilah Said



ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

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NABILLAH JALAL, 24

After four years of studying at the prestigious Royal College of Music in London, Nabillah Jalal will return home for good later this month.

It was in London that the youngest of three children became interested in Malay culture.

The pianist and conductor says: "I felt strongly about how I was Malay. Being away from Singapore, I realised that it formed a huge part of me."

For her thesis, she decided to research traditional Malay music from the 1960s, an era with a wealth of original music from genres such as pop yeh yeh, and on film soundtracks.

At first, Nabillah – who is the school's first Malay Singaporean student – was afraid that her school would not allow her to do it.

She says: "Being a Western classical college, there is nobody who knows South-east Asian music."

But her tutors referred her to supervisors from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, who have the requisite expertise.

She also received help from musicians in Singapore, including Iskandar Khairuldin, a member of pop yeh yeh band The Rhythm Boys, which was formed in the 1960s.

Since then, she has developed a particular interest in contemporary music, in relation to her identity as a Malay Singaporean.

Together with six other Singaporean students in London, she formed The Bhumi Collective earlier this year.

The group premiered a work titled Bhumi at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe last month, which married traditional Malay dance and music. Nabillah was the music director.

She says: "It was a humbling experience because I had to learn about instrumental Malay music. My background is Western classical, so it was a whole new world."

She roped in her best friend, a Lithuanian composer, to help create some of the pieces for Bhumi.

She says: "He doesn't know anything about Malay music. But he told me 'there is a certain sound when you play that cannot be achieved by anyone else'. It's a 'lenggok', a type of lyricism that Malay music has."

The collective is also part of Ikan Girl, a work featuring original music by composer Syafiqah 'Adha Sallehin which premieres next month. It includes elements of traditional Malay, contemporary and Bharatanatyam dance. Nabillah is the music director of the work.

When she returns, she will teach piano, especially to those from lower-income groups who may not have access to classical music.

Back in 2012, her parents could not afford to send her overseas, but she had help from scholarships and bursaries. Her father works in shipping and her mother is a housewife.

"I received a lot of help from people and now I want to help in any way possible. My dream is for a society that allows individuals to realise their potential."

Nabilah Said



PHOTO: JANE LAU



ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

3

DANIAL ARIFFIN AZMAN, 25

Danial Ariffin Azman's love of music started with the piano: Tinkling away at the keys in kindergarten, he eked out a few tentative melodies.

When he joined his secondary school band, he started playing percussion instruments, among them the snare drum and vibraphone.

But he wanted to do more with his music.

A fan of legendary Malay entertainer P. Ramlee – whose many talents included acting, singing and composing – he saw music as a way to give a voice to his culture and heritage. "If the young don't want to be part of efforts to keep Malay culture alive, who else would?" says the freelance composer and arranger.

"I kept asking myself this and telling myself I need to do something, to go beyond my comfort zone – the piano – and start playing Malay instruments."

In 2012, he joined the Orkestra Melayu Singapura Belia (Singapore Youth Malay Orchestra) to learn more about his musical roots. Since then, he has picked up traditional instruments such as the rebana, kompang and gamelan, and is handy with the accordion – which is often used in Malay music.

This has added new depth to his

pieces, he says. "After that, the music I composed used both traditional and Western instruments. Fusing them creates new colours and I think the young appreciate that."

He will be playing the piano in the B3 Concert by Nusantara Arts on Saturday, for which he composed three songs based on poems.

Danial, who graduated with a diploma in sonic arts from Republic Polytechnic in 2014, has composed songs for theatre productions, short films and symphonic bands, among others, and arranged music for the likes of popular Singapore singer Imran Ajmain.

His efforts to meld East and West in his music are not just an attempt to preserve Malay music, but also to breathe new life into it.

He says: "I want to surprise people with my music. Youth may be unfamiliar with Malay music, its rhythms and its instruments, so I want to make them go, 'Oh, you can do that? It can sound like that?'"

"There are no limits to our traditional music. It's not dying. It's not old-fashioned. It's about how you use rhythms and instruments. With some imagination, you can do so many things with it."

Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh



PHOTO: SHAWNA CHIA

4

AMNI MUSFIRAH, 22

Amni Musfirah's time in the United States is giving her a renewed drive to explore and express her culture and identity.

The student at Berklee College of Music in Boston says: "Here, I'm astounded by how passionate the Spanish and African Americans are in keeping their culture alive, especially through music."

She adds via e-mail: "Even when they played pop music, they would make sure to weave in elements of their backgrounds, whether rhythm or instrumentation."

"So I've tried to do that, especially in arrangements – insert a little Malay music identity. It definitely gives a different colour."

The composition major first tried her hand at songwriting when she was 10 years old and has been hooked since. She has churned out about 50 pop songs and 20 instrumental pieces.

She has made her name as a performer too. When she sang at the ChildAid charity concert in 2008, she impressed Cultural Medallion recipient Iskandar Ismail so much

that he invited her to sing the theme song of the Asian Youth Games in Singapore the following year.

She also performed at the opening and closing ceremonies of the Youth Olympic Games in Singapore in 2010.

Last month, she released a Malay single, Bisik Cintamu, which she wrote with fellow Berklee students Irena Taib and Sandra Lim. It is getting airtime on Malay radio stations here and there are plans to release it in Malaysia and put out a music video.

For the B3 Concert, Amni composed music built around 30-year-old Nur Muhammad Hidayat Nordin's poem Budaya Bahasa Belia (Culture Language Youth), a call to preserve and be proud of Malay culture and language.

The message resonates with her. It is, after all, the young who are crucial in keeping the culture, language and music alive, she says.

"If it's not us, then who else?"

Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh



ST PHOTO: AZMI ATHNI

5

BAKTI KHAIR, 24

Singer-songwriter Bakti Khair grew up listening to his father's music. Now, songwriting has become a family affair.

He has written about 20 songs with his father Khair Yasin, a seasoned Malay songwriter with more than two decades of experience.

And their shared passion for making music has brought them closer.

Bakti, a composition major student at Lasalle College of the Arts, says: "When I was growing up, sometimes he would be so busy that we'd rarely see each other. Now, we speak every day. We exchange opinions on music, talk about our experiences."

"In a way, I'm seeing a different side of him, not just as a father, but also as a creative partner. And he's really someone to admire."

Bakti started writing and arranging songs in 2008, when he was studying for his diploma in sonic arts at Republic Polytechnic. Songwriting, he says, was the medium he felt he could best express himself.

When he first started out, his

father was his keenest mentor, teaching him not just the technical processes, but also the ins and outs of the industry.

Khair, 51, has written songs for rock icon Ramli Sarip and rock band Lovehunters.

Bakti is striking out alone.

Besides the projects he worked on with his father, he has written seven songs on his own and plans to release a solo album of his works.

With his music, he looks for ways to pay tribute to the beauty of the Malay language. The lyrics in most of his songs are inspired by Malay poems.

He is now learning more about traditional instruments such as the seruling – a bamboo flute – and trying to incorporate them into his pieces.

He says: "I'm still learning more about my culture and there's a lot to learn because it's so rich."

"Young people have to take responsibility for our culture. We can't wait for our parents or grandparents to protect it for us."

Nur Asyiqin Mohamad Salleh