



### MUSICAL MOSAICS: A SYMPHONIC PORTRAIT OF SINGAPORE'S TOWNS

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**WHERE** Victoria Concert Hall,  
11 Empress Place  
**WHEN** Aug 4, 4pm  
**ADMISSION** From \$28  
**INFO** [str.sg/9RHM](http://str.sg/9RHM)

Violin soloist Lynnette Seah will be a guest conductor at Asian Cultural Symphony Orchestra's Musical Mosaics: A Symphonic Portrait Of Singapore's Towns. PHOTO: ASIAN CULTURAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

# 8 young S'poreans compose classical music inspired by iconic S'pore towns

**Clement Yong**  
Correspondent

How would the spirit of iconic Singapore towns such as Bedok, Geylang Serai and Toa Payoh sound – and in a classical orchestral context to boot?

That was the gauntlet thrown down by Asian Cultural Symphony Orchestra's (ACSO) music director Adrian Chiang, who has marshalled 45 musicians for a fun twist on the usual classical concert ahead of Singapore's 59th birthday on Aug 9.

Eight young Singaporean composers, after going on walking tours and deep diving into reference texts, have each written pieces about 10 minutes long, incorporating special "ethnic" instruments to further de-centre Western classical conventions.

The result, *Musical Mosaics: A Symphonic Portrait Of Singapore's Towns*, plays on Aug 4 at the Victoria Concert Hall, and features Singaporean guest concertmaster and violin soloist Lynnette Seah.

Chiang, 46, says: "ACSO has always been a proponent of Singapore heritage and composers. Sometimes, we learn about the rich histories of Singapore towns in textbooks. Now, we use them as inspiration so our composers can make sense of them in new ways."

The eight composers are not new composers, but emerging ones

with several compositions under their belts. Their alma maters vary from Lasalle College of the Arts and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore to Berklee College of Music in the United States and University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna, Austria.

From National University of Singapore's Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, Syafiqah 'Adha Sallehin, 34, has sought ambitiously to not only capture Geylang Serai's connection to the Orang Laut, but also the cacophony of its trademark bazaar.

Her piece, *Reminiscing Geylang Serai*, is a narrative tracing the Malay enclave over time, supplemented by a theatrical element – a musician acts out the role of a famous flower seller, dubbed *raja bunga*, or king of the flowers, who used to hawk his petals while reciting pantun into a loudhailer.

"I've also added a Malay accordion to invoke the aesthetics of Malay music," Syafiqah adds, speculating that it might be the first time a Malay accordion is being featured in an orchestra in Singapore.

On her unusual source material of cartoonist Kassim Bachik's comic *Geylang Serai My Town*, she says: "The illustrations of his memories – how it looked like with the three HDB blocks when HDB first came in, the business of Geylang Serai market, the trishaws with bells as the common way of commuting – have all been inspira-

tions for me."

Germaine Goh, 28, has a different obsession with Toa Payoh, which was once known as the "Chicago of Singapore" for its high crime rates and reputation as a hideout for gangs and criminals.

On a walking tour with heritage researcher Lee Kok Leong, she learnt how taxi drivers used to stop passengers outside Toa Payoh for fear of entering the town, though it was later cleaned up to host the 1973 South-east Asian Peninsular Games, Singapore's first international sporting event since gaining independence in 1965.

The grittiness of Toa Payoh is layered in her piece with rhythmic devices from Indian music that displaces listeners' sense of time, she says. She has also taken a further intercultural approach by infusing it with a hint of Malay dance form *joget*, though overall, she hopes it evokes the heartland's sense of wholesome family and home.

"I wanted the music to be joyful, to be warm, to have that sense of comfort."

Chiang says there is now a larger pool of not just composers, but also musicians in Singapore, compared with a decade ago.

"Collaborations like this don't happen on a daily basis. For composers, the more you write, the better you become. That's just the nature of any job. We want to find a Singapore voice, a Singapore identity, not just in pop, but in classical music as well."