

LEISURE



Doing his bit for Singapore

Vietnamese-Canadian guitarist Han Vo-Ta has written a classical guitar version of Stand Up for Singapore.

By CATHERINE TAN

AMONG the 27,000 people at the National Stadium on Sept 8 who stood and gasped with pleasure at the New York Philharmonic's lush orchestral version of Stand Up For Singapore was Vietnamese-Canadian guitarist-composer Han Vo-Ta.

"The 36-year-old musician by nature and bank manager by profession" said: "For an aching moment, I almost wanted to be a Singaporean so that I too had a right to stand up and cheer when I heard that familiar 25th anniversary tune given the full orchestral treatment."

"His imagination fired by the rousing melody, Vo-Ta went home and worked until the wee hours of the morning writing a classical guitar version of it.

By the end of this month, Vo-Ta's version of this tune and his solo guitar arrangements for four other Singapore melodies — Sing Your Way Home, *Di Tanjong Katong*, *Chan Mali Chan* and *Burung Kakak Tua* — will be compiled in *Cantos De Singapore*, a special 25th anniversary of nation-building commemorative edition. The book will be available in music shops here.

Cantos De Singapore (Songs of Singapore in Spanish), published under the sponsorship of the Bank of Montreal Asia Limited which he manages, is Vo-Ta's contribution to Singapore's 25th anniversary celebrations.

For the banker and his



Han Vo-Ta ... after his experiences in war-torn Vietnam, music seems "sinfully easy and enjoyable"

family of three who have lived all over Canada and the Far East, Singapore is the tropical island home where they have felt they can "really play a part and join in like they have never done before."

When Canada's foremost concert guitarist Liona Boyd was in Singapore to give a concert last week, she heard Vo-Ta's arrangements of the Singapore folk songs.

They enchanted her so that she is seriously considering them for her next album of favourite songs of the world.

"Life is full of surprises," said Vo-Ta.

"Maybe I can help to get Singapore known for her music as well as her business prowess."

All his life, Vo-Ta has always had to choose between the two.

He was among the top five musicians in Vietnam when he graduated from the Saigon National Conservatory of Music in 1968.

He was also a top student who won a scholarship to study business and mathematics at the San Jose State University.

Since he was three, Vo-Ta had known war — exploding bombs in the dead of the night and bodies of the wounded and dead in the streets.

Once, when he was 12, he even had to go down on his knees to beg for his life when he was confronted by rifle-wielding Vietcongs on his way home from school.

Music thus seemed too "sinfully easy and enjoyable" a way to make a living and Vo-Ta chose the world of figures and dollars and cents.

By 1973, he had graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) with a Masters degree in management and won two awards for having the best grades in his class and for his cultural contributions to the college.

Most music lovers and musicians along the American East Coast have been to Vo-Ta's recitals and know of his MIT classical guitar society.

His first job was with the Bank of Montreal and he lived in Canada for six years.

In 1975, Saigon fell and, feeling like "a mango tree transplanted in the snow" because there was no more home to go to, the music in him dried up and he stopped playing the guitar.

Only four years ago, while living in Manila, did he begin to play again.

In Singapore, his involvement began early last year when he gave short concerts over the radio and TV. During Deepavali last year, he transcribed *Sing Your Way Home* into an intense classical guitar piece.

Not long after that, he heard a recording of Peter Low's choir singing

Di Tanjong Katong and the melody so inspired him that he soon translated it into music the guitar could produce.

Chan Mali Chan challenged him to translate it into a rhumba flamenco style while all the possibilities for his favourite tremolo effects in *Burung Kakak Tua* made him work on it next.

But for the "modern nomad", who as a youth longed for able Vietnamese leaders so that he could return to work for his homeland, *Stand Up For Singapore* and its soaring patriotic overtones is the song closest to his heart.

He has published 2,000 copies of this arrangement (600 of which were distributed during Liona Boyd's concert) to send to the guitar-playing soldiers in the Ministry of Defence and to schools through the Ministry of Education so that those who can't make joyful noises singing can play it on the guitar.

ARTS & BOOK



Aspiring classical guitarists meet at the society to widen their listening and playing repertoire, and to listen to each other in ensemble

Fresh life for guitarists

MUSIC

By **GEORGINA
EMMANUEL**

IF beautiful environments go hand in glove with beautiful art, then Mr Han Vo-Ta, President of the recently resuscitated Singapore Classical Guitar Society, has got it just right.

We were standing in the quiet and pretty surroundings of the Alliance Francaise on a sun-drenched late Sunday afternoon.

No student was charging in and out of language classes; no typewriter was clucking noisily; no car was revving in the drive-way.

Instead, a soft breeze played with the sounds of



Mr Alex Abisheganaden on the finer points of ensemble playing.

Instead, a soft breeze played with the sounds of about 100 guitars, while young people in twos and threes lazed around, talking quietly or simply lost in the melange of impromptu music-making.

"Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it rejuvenating? Like birds, they have come out of the nest to share and perform and we want to welcome all of them, not just those who are fine guitarists," enthused Mr Vo-Ta.

Revitalise

Director of the Bank of Montreal by profession, accomplished graduate musician and guitar aficionado by inclination, Mr Vo-Ta is an absolute live-wire.

He had hardly set foot upon our shores when the Singapore Classical Guitar Society — founded in the mid-1960s and dwindled to barely a handful of members by the end of 1983 — swelled almost overnight to a record membership of 164!

How has he done it? With an attitude of let's not just talk, let's do, and oodles of charm and get-up-and-go.

This is not the first time that Mr Vo-Ta has been instrumental in either revitalising guitar associations or forming new ones. Wherever

his work takes him, he looks for opportunities to develop a love for classical guitar music in the community because of his love for the instrument.

To help him spearhead this particular face-lift, Mr Vo-Ta gathered together the most illustrious of our guitarists, including Alex Abisheganaden, Robert Luse, Ronald Nguyen, Magdelene Wong, Omar bin Abu Bakar, Joseph Tan, Ernest Kwok, Tan Ser Soon and Agnes Hoisington (founder member and rock of loyalty since the society's inception back in 1967).

They have pooled their resources to put the society into ship-shape condition.

Why have they done it? "Because these youngsters need the exposure and the chance to meet others of varying levels of ability," said Mr Abisheganaden.

"Right now, they only know those in the schools and groups in which they operate. The society is a different dimension.

"They can widen their listening and playing repertoire, try solo performance if they are ready, and learn to listen to each other in ensemble."

Added Tan Ser Soon: "The society also has an important social function. It's some-

where for the guitarists to belong and participate in activities."

On the afternoon I attended the workshop, two lectures, run concurrently with an 80-strong audience each, had just ended.

One lecture, devoted to music appreciation with reference to guitar repertoire, was given by Mr Abisheganaden. The other, on Flamenco guitar, was given by Ronald Nguyen.

After that, members were split into teams for workshops. Each team was run by a group leader assisted by team captains.

Incentive

Working in small gaggles — in side-rooms, corridors, offices, anywhere they could find some floor space — they rehearsed their parts in preparation for the guitar orchestra performance after tea break.

In addition, a group under the tutelage of Robert Luse was preparing for solo items that would form part of a mini-concert — the culmination of the afternoon's activities. This concert also featured a short recital by Ernest Kwok.

As an incentive to the bet-

ter players, there are plans to streamline the orchestra into three ensembles, two senior and one junior.

Other plans keeping the committee on its toes include:

- A guitar instructors' course, sponsored by the society, to help field teachers for community centres;

- A mail-ordering service to help members obtain sheet music;

- A series of four-monthly recitals by some of Asean's best classical guitarists;

- A master class by a world-renowned guitarist (Alice Artzt is tentatively scheduled for September);

- The formation of a guitar ensemble for occasional public performance, and

- A weekend guitar camp sometime mid-year.

Details about membership and fees are available from Agnes Hoisington at No. 2, Jalan Rengas, Seletar Hills Estate, Singapore 2880.

The society meets every third Sunday of the month, from 2 to 6 pm, at the Alliance Francaise in Draycott Park.

Robert Luse will give a solo performance on the guitar at the Shell Theatre on Feb 22 at 12.45 pm.

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'TALKING GUITAR'

Classical society sees an infusion of life

By VIOLET OON

"THE workshops I attend at the Singapore Classical Guitar Society meetings are much better than classes I've attended in music schools," declared Anthony Ho, 20, a Singapore Armed Forces platoon sergeant.

He is one of a large proportion of youngsters who have "invaded" the 20-year-old society and who have decided to spend one Sunday afternoon a month at the Alliance Francaise "talking guitar" with other aficionados.

One presumes that it is not the aim of the society to supplant the commercial music schools but the very fact that the instructors conducting the workshops are doing it out of love, gives it an edge.

For example, Singapore's Dr Robert Liew conducted a workshop for the Society as did other guitar names; Alex Abisheganaden, John Mills (concert guitarist) and Ronald Nguyen are just a few among them.

"Talking guitar" with five of the Society's younger members revealed that they do need an association like this to keep them abreast of the musical world. They all expressed a deep love for the instrument and had been taking up guitar lessons with professional teachers, but their exposure seemed to be confined to technique and interpretation of works.

They seemed totally ignorant of the wider world of music beyond the small confines of what they knew.

For example, Robert Liew's name was familiar but they knew not in what context except that he was a somebody in guitar. And Alex Abisheganaden, the man whose name has been synonymous with the guitar in Singapore for over 20 years (he was in fact one of the founder members of the Society), drew forth a blank look, even though he is one of the advisors of the Society, and one of the more visible ones at that!

Whatever lack of sophistication was, however, made up for in enthusiasm and the Society is doing something to harness this youthful vitality in its very active programme.

But its president, Mr Han Vo-Ta, who is credited with revitalising the Society in recent months with an imaginative range of activities - including the inception of a very readable and informative newsletter - voiced a concern over a sense of impersonality that had arisen from its sudden success.

That is why, at the last meeting in June, the format took a change. Instead of formal workshop sessions, a guitar exhibition was held, providing time for members to talk together in small groups, with a view to holding an informal workshop later.

Over 20 famous name guitars were on exhibition,



Guitar society president Mr Han Vo-Ta (standing, fourth from left in back row) and members of the Singapore Classical Guitar Society at their June meeting. The \$10,000 Hermann Hauser guitar is held at bottom row, third form left.



the most valuable being the 1926 Hermann Hauser valued at \$10,000.

Said Mr Vo-Ta as treasurer Agnes Hoisington signed in the 250th member: "We've been expanding so fast in recent months that members have been saying that the Society has become impersonal. We hope that with this exhibition, people will have time to talk together.

"Later on, we will be breaking up into small groups of 20 or so to each group, for a discussion session."

That was in June. July's programme includes a strumming session and the emphasis will be on "light popular music and the guitar". Robert Nguyen will also speak in How to Practise the Guitar.

Those interested in joining the Singapore Classical Guitar Society should turn up at the meeting on July 20 at 2 pm at the Alliance Francaise, 4, Draycott Park. Membership costs \$18 a year.

The guitar takes centre stage again

By CATHERINE ONG

IF THE full houses at its four concerts were anything to go by, Singapore's first mini-guitar festival, The World Of Guitars, held early last year, was a resounding success.

So a second guitar mini-festival, called The World Of Guitars II, has been organised, starting with a concert by New Zealand-based John Mills and Cobie Smit at the DBS Auditorium on Tuesday at 8 pm.

This time, the Ministry of Community Development (MCD) and the National Theatre Trust (NTT), which jointly organised the first festival, has passed the mantle of responsibility to the Singapore Classical Guitar Society.

After last year's success, guitarists from all over the world, who are always on the look-out for new audiences, contacted the society directly to express their interest in performing in Singapore.

So it is only logical that the 150-strong society, the only one of its kind in Singapore, runs this year's show.

Formed in 1967, the society almost "fizzled out" in the '70s, says its vice-president, Mr Alex Abisheganaden.

It was revived this decade by its current president, Mr Han Vo-Ta, a conservatory-trained classical guitarist-cum-financier.

Mr Han, a Vietnamese, is the senior manager of special projects at City Developments Ltd, which is part of the Hong Leong Group of companies.

It was Mr Han who secured the sponsorship of Hong Leong Finance Ltd, and Mr Abisheganaden who, with the help from the MCD's Cultural Affairs Division, handled all the arrangements to make this year's guitar festival possible.

Once again, another bunch of top classical guitarists in the world will perform.

They will concentrate on presenting different eras of music, from the Baroque to the present.

According to Mr Abisheganaden, Swede Erik Mollerstrom, who specialises in Spanish guitar music, is the man who will perform "the kind of music that everyone who learns the guitar wants to play".

Hubert Kappel, who was contacted through the Goethe-Institut, is a world-class guitarist.

Last year, the MCD and the NTT spent \$28,000 on the World Of Guitars. For the World Of Guitars II, the Singapore Classical Guitar Society's annual grant of \$6,000 from the MCD will be used to meet extra expenses.

Three members have also opened their homes to five of the guest artistes.

The Goethe-Institut has arranged for Kappel to stay at a hotel.

This year's six musicians paid for their own airfare to Singapore. The artistes' fees will be paid from the festival concert ticket sales.

Who will be playing



ERIK MOLLERSTROM represents the best of interpreters of the Spanish school of guitar.

Born in Stockholm, he played both the banjo and guitar but went to Spain in 1962 to concentrate on the guitar.

Since then, he has studied with Eduardo Sainz de la Maza in Barcelona, Roland Bengtsson in Stockholm and the British guitar master, Julian Bream.

Now a renowned soloist, he is also a chamber musician who has recorded albums in a duo with a cellist and as a member of a Swedish professional guitar trio.

MARIA HOL, one of Holland's top cellists, has had works dedicated to her by European contemporary composers.

She currently teaches the cello and chamber music at the Municipal Conservatory in Zwolle, Holland.

She will team up with her husband, Pieter van der Staak, to perform unique music written for their combination of instruments.



HUBERT KAPPEL offers "nothing short of the utmost excellence", according to the West German radio station, Saarlandischer Rundfunk.

In 1978, he won the first prize in the Concorso Internazionale di Interpretazione in Gargnano, Italy.

In 1978, he founded the Paganini Duo with violinist Michael Dauth of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. He performs regularly with the Swiss ensemble, Die Kammermusiker Zurich.

Besides teaching at the Cologne College of Music, Kappel directs master classes in Hungary, Greece, England and Israel.



COBIE SMIT hails from Rotterdam, where she began studying the guitar at nine.

Later, she moved to France, where she took part in master classes given by the celebrated guitar duo, Ako Ito and Henri Dorigny.

She began to give duo concerts with John Mills from 1982, and they married two years later.

Since 1985, the couple has been based in Nelson, New Zealand, where she also teaches at the Nelson School of Music and the Nelson Polytechnic.



JOHN MILLS began studying the guitar when he was nine. From 1966 to 1969, he was a student of John Williams at the Royal College of Music, from which he graduated with the Association of Royal College of Music scholarship.

After winning a Spanish government scholarship, he played in master classes conducted by guitar maestro Andre Segovia at Santiago de Compostale.

From the late '70s, he has also taught in seminars and master classes throughout the world. He is a tutor at the Nelson School of Music and Nelson Polytechnic in New Zealand.



PIETER VAN DER STAAK has studied with Emilio Pujol and Andres Segovia. He is well known among guitarists for having an original Antonio Torres and two Fleta guitars in his collection.

He is a respected solo guitarist, teacher and composer. He has composed music for TV and radio plays and theatre productions.

Today, he is on a panel of select composers commissioned by the famous publishing house of Broekmans and Van Poppel to write for solo, ensemble and chamber music with the guitar.

The Straits Times, Wednesday, January 16, 1991

Arts & Entertainment

WHEN he is not pre-occupied with figures, banker Han Vo-Ta spends his time championing guitar music, as president of the Singapore Classical Guitar Society which brings in international soloists for regular guitar concerts.

Tomorrow evening's recital at the Singapore Conference Hall features Canadian guitarist Norbert Kraft and a classical programme dotted with names such as Tedesco, Albéniz, de Falla, Villa-Lobos and Torroba.

Winner of the 1985 Segovia International Competition in Spain and a recording artist on the Chandos label, Kraft has been praised by critics for his use of timbre and warmth of tone.

His recital is sponsored by Singapore Finance and the Canadian High Commission in Singapore.

Tickets at \$5, \$8, \$10, \$12 and \$15 are on sale at the Central Booking Office (Victoria Theatre), Centrepoint, Tangs, Wisma Atria and Yamaha Music (Plaza Singapura).