

MPYO Principal Conductor Kevin Field talks with Matthew Kam about his upcoming performance with MPYO in June...

One of the most important aspects of MPYO and also the most rewarding for all concerned is to include Malaysian talents as guest soloists, especially in this case. I first met Matthew some 6 years ago when MPYO was all but an A4 proposal and it has taken until now to find the right moment for what I am sure will prove a memorable collaboration.

I put my Twitter-like questions to Matthew a few days ago and he replied with Masters-like content that I am sure will register with members of the MPYO as they embark on further music studies, at home or abroad.

What's your earliest memory of music having an impact on you?

Before I fully learnt to speak, I apparently tried to imitate my sister singing the song that won her the local music competition in Sibu, Sarawak in the early 1980s. The tune was incredibly memorable, but I never got the lyrics right. During those years as I grew up in Sibu, Western classical music was not very common. As I went to the local music school for my lessons each week, I was constantly captured by the sounds of Mozart and Bach that streamed out from the teaching rooms, however jumbled they might have sounded in the hallway! My first public performance in Sibu was when I was six or seven.

• Why the piano?

We had a piano at home. My sister was sitting for exams and my brother was also learning the piano at the time. It seemed the most logical thing for my parents to send me for piano tuition also. I was itching to play even when I was a toddler; apparently I was noted for climbing onto the piano stool on my own after my sister finished practicing. Right from the start, I felt completely at home with the sound and the touch of the instrument.

- **Any other instruments?**

I attempted the violin for two years in Sibu, and also the organ! After we moved to Melbourne in 1994, I started learning the flute and kept it going for a number of years. During those years in Australia, I also had this crazy obsession for the harp, but that never worked out. I also tried composing. But really, playing the piano has and will always keep me fulfilled.

- **Having studied, lived and worked in Australia and the UK, what does Malaysia mean to you now?**

Malaysia, especially Kuching (Sarawak), will always be the place I proudly tell people where I come from. I think of Malaysia quite often, even though I have happily settled into the way of life in the UK, and in Australia in the recent past. Each time when I returned to Malaysia to perform, as I had done most recently for the HSBC International Piano Festival and a tour of Sarawak subsequently, it was always enjoyable.

- **We discussed performing one of a variety of concertos with MPYO; are you happy we settled on the Rach'?!**

Yes, very much so. Thank you!

- **Being one of the most performed and recorded concertos in the repertoire how do you integrate Kam into the performance?**

I think it is so important to put the composer and the music first, and myself second. I try to respect the score and all of Rachmaninoff's markings, although it is interesting to hear in some of his own recordings that he did not play exactly to the score! It has also helped me to know about his background and life. I feel I have a natural empathy for his music, and so in this respect, there is no need for me to over project myself into the concerto.

- **I understand you are revisiting this work for a second or third time: what has changed in the work and you since the first occasion?**

Since the first time I listened to and studied this concerto during my teens, I have never stopped loving it. Looking at it again gives me the chance to find a new perspective on the work, a more mature approach to realising the overall shape. To

me, the Second Concerto remains fresh and complete in every way. It is very intricately worked out yet it sounds so spontaneous. It exudes amazing craftsmanship and sincerity.

- **In terms of synesthesia, what colour is the concerto?!**

Some musicians do have this condition that enables them to see distinct colours in each key. As for myself, I vaguely associate yellow with the key of F Major, and light green with E Major. I suppose the home key of the concerto, C minor, can be associated with a very rich or dark colour. If only Messiaen were still around today, I would ask him for his help and come back to you on this question!

- **What single aspect of Malaysia would you uproot and propagate into your life in the UK?**

"Kari Ayam" – it's actually not that easy to get Malay or Nyonya curry here in England.

- **Can you see yourself living back in Malaysia; if yes; when, if no; why not?**

Yes and No. Yes, if I were offered a teaching position with the chance to maintain a performance career locally and internationally. At the moment, I feel encouraged by the way things have unfolded in my life and my career thus far as a musician. England is so close to Europe, and there are opportunities here to keep me going onwards and upwards. I also have Australia as another option if I ever chose to move back to Melbourne for music. At this stage in my life, I guess it is work that determines my whereabouts. I feel very lucky indeed to be able to do what I love doing.

- **What are you looking forward to the most on your upcoming trip to perform with MPYO?**

What I am looking forward to most when I go back to perform, with both you and the MPYO, is the chance to rehearse and meet with the musicians. Hopefully we can strike up some new friendships. Needless to say, I am very happy indeed for this opportunity of being invited back to Malaysia as a soloist, appearing with this wonderful group of talented young musicians.

Matthew Kam will perform Rachmaninov's, Piano Concerto No.2 in C minor, Op.18 on Wednesday 8th June 2011 at the Dewan Filharmonik PETRONAS.