

Chapter One Chao Mei-pa

Bel canto

I started going to school in September, 1950. It wasn't school. Not really. It was kindergarten. It was a kindergarten for girls, and I was one of two boys who were given permission, initially, to just stand there, with our backs to the wall, watching the girls going about their daily, two-hour business of singing, reading, playing, and going to the toilet. After a few weeks, we two boys were allowed to join in.

I liked the kindergarten, but did not have a good impression of girls, in 1950. Messy, skinny girls, I thought. I had seen enough of girls. They were just like my 3 year old sister, may be a shade bigger, but much more noisy. They were barely tolerable; but watching a few was superior to just watching one, at home. Eventually, one girl talked to me. She invited me to her birthday party. She was nice. That party was nice too. Until we all started sweating, having chased one another for 30 minutes around the flat, and started smelling quite foul, girls and boys.

Girls.

One night, at dinner, I heard my parents discussing a news report with my grandmother, and my auntie, over dinner, about a girl.

"Imagine it..... 19 years old.....taking off all her clothes, trying to jump off a veranda.....having to be taken to a mental hospital.....shameless, that girl....." said Mother.

"Poor girl....." said Granny.

"What made her do that.....her folks?" asked Auntie.

"The radio report said she had no parents..... she was given a job at a clothing factory, where she could make a living....." said Father.

"Hm.....poor girl.....too much work....." said Granny.

"Not quite." Father said." At the factory, they had a radio. In the late afternoon, the story teller read a heart wrenching story about a poor orphan..... the girl heard the story, started to feel for the orphan, and for herself..... began to act strangely..... and was caught before she jumped off the veranda, or roof, or....."

"Stories on radio....." said Auntie. She knew listening to stories on the radio

was one of my favorite activities during the day. The radio was my best friend, in 1950. Second best friend actually, because Cheong, my dog, was the best. Cheong was available 24 hours a day, the radio was not. The radio would only broadcast a few hours a day. But those hours were precious. I heard news, about fighting in..... somewhere up north..... not sure where.....stories, told by story tellers..... and most important, music, Cantonese music, Chiu Chau music, songs sung in Pu Tong Hwa, in a dialect I did not know in those days.....and 'western' music, as the man on the radio would call it.

Cantonese music was, to me, the easiest. I could pick out the words, a few of them. I did not know the meaning, but I could imitate the sounds. Later on when I sang the words, with the music, to my mother, she would correct me..... I still had no idea what the man or woman were singing. But the drums, and loud clattering of cymbals, and wood blocks..... good fun. Sometimes I would try reproduce the pattern of the drums and cymbals on the metal water buckets in the bathroom, until Auntie got thoroughly annoyed, came into the toilet, and dragged me out by the collar. "Stop that noise..... you would wake the baby....." That baby was my new born younger brother. Smelly, weepy, brother. I would not want to wake him up, for sure.

One reason why I was allowed to go to the kindergarten at Ying Wa Girls' School in Robinson Road in 1950 was that my mother taught there. She taught Chinese. She took me to school some mornings, before Ying Wa started the kindergarten in 1950. There I met the headmistress, Miss Vera Silkcocks. She was austere looking, with piercing eyes, and spoke in a language I could not understand. But I decided to be my exemplary self, looking her straight in the eyes, bowing, shaking her hand firmly, the way I was taught, and tried to give her the best impressions. Until I was formally allowed to join her kindergarten.

We had many singing sessions at Ying Wa. I loved the singing. I could do it all day. I could out sing any of the other students, any time, anywhere..... "You have a loud voice," Mother said. "You had a lot of practice. You cried your heart out when you were a baby. In November, 1945, when you were born, we had no milk powder. I was so skinny, after the War, and I had no milk," Mother said. "We fed you rice water.....and you cried until we found milk powder, or I had milk".

In the autumn of 1950, I always walked to Ying Wa Girls' School with Mother. I would run in front. Mother had to carry her brief case with her books and papers. I had a light bag. Mother was never my match when it came to running, unless I was sick, which was quite often. I didn't know it at the time. I had severe allergy. My sons and their children had my genes, and traits, and my allergies. Pollens, cats, dogs, food, water, or the sight of a dirty neighbor, or whatever..... fever would come, and I would be forced to stay home.

After finishing my kindergarten lessons, I waited for Mother to finish her lessons, and walked home with me, for lunch. Mother had to go back to Ying Wa after lunch, for work. I would say 'bye', watched, waited until her silhouette disappeared in the distance, climbed onto the table, and turn on the radio.

By November, 1950 was quite chilly. It was deep autumn. I had to wear a thick sweater, when I waited for Mother to finish her lessons. I stood at the ground level. I heard the sound of a man, singing in a manner I had not heard before. He had a beautiful sound. Not the sound of the Cantonese or Chiu Chow singing that I had heard. Different, completely different. Much louder. Much.....much more powerful..... what was it like? Yes. Loud..... like the voice of the man who lived two floors down at home, when he yelled unintelligible words, obscene words, by Mother's standards, at his wife and son. No. The neighbor's shouting was rude, harsh and obscene. This sound of the man singing that morning at Ying Wa was..... was fire, thunder, lightning, heat, cold.....all at the same time.....I don't know what.....just new, and to me, strange.....so, so strangely beautiful.

I felt cold, listening.

Mother came down the stairs. She tried to take my hand. I pulled it away. "Ma, who is that, the singing.....?"

"Oh. Our new music teacher." Mother said. "Professor Chao.....or something..... oh yes, Professor Chao Mei-pa."

"But he..... he sings so differently, so, so nice....."

"He is trained overseas..... It's nice, isn't it.....and listen..... listen to the girls, trying to sing, sing like him....." Mother put down her bag.

We listened. The Ying Wa Girls' sure sounded different to my ears. The girls were doing their best, to sing, well, to copy Professor Chao. But it was Professor Chao's voice that shocked me. His voice rose above those of his 30 students, soaring, drifting, floating.....

"Nice, isn't it?" Mother said.

We listened for 10 minutes. The music lesson ended. We walked home.

In the days that followed I took every opportunity to listen to Professor Chao Mei-pa when he gave lessons at Ying Wa. I walked up to the level where the music

room was. I stood just a few feet away from the door of the music room, and ran away as soon as the music lesson ended, or when Mother appeared.

At dinner I asked, "Father, why don't you and mother sing at church like Professor Chao?"

"You like his singing, right? Who doesn't. But do you know where he studied, and how hard he worked? Years, years and years of study, of practice, of hard work under the harshest of masters. In Europe, in America..... Church? No way. None of us had singing lessons. Most of us cannot read music. Professor Chao Mei-pa. Hong Kong is lucky to have him. I don't know how long he will stay, though." Father said.

"And Ying Wa is lucky to have him, as the music teacher....." Mother said.

"And I am lucky to be able to listen to him, daily, almost daily....." I thought.

Years later, in my senior, secondary years, I read up on Professor Chao's style of singing. Some of my teachers said it was the "Bel canto" style. But watch out, one teacher said. In the 17th, 18th Century, "Bel canto" was the style of castrated singers. Castrated? Yes, said the teachers. No balls.....

We all laughed, sheepishly.....

By all means learn that style of singing, I thought, but don't anyone ever think he could have a go at my balls..... I am not a cat, a dog, or a pet. In any case, by the late 19th Century, the term 'Bel canto' referred to other, broader methods of voice production, and man no longer had to lose their testicles just to be able to sing opera. My manhood was secure.

Professor Chao taught in a number of schools in the 1950s and 1960s, and founded choirs which gave regular performances in Hong Kong.

My sister studied at Ying Wa, took weekly lessons from Professor Chao, and was a member of the Ying Wa Girls' School Choir, which won prizes at the annual Schools Music Festival.

I spent 2 years at Ying Wa, and listened to him when he gave music lessons. As soon as he finished, or as soon as Mother appeared, I went home. His Bel canto singing stayed with me and guided throughout my life. I know how beautiful the human voice could be, how smooth and touching, how hauntingly, soul wrenchingly beautiful.

And powerful. I have never stopped being amazed by how powerful the human voice could be, that single human voice, which soars above a full symphony orchestra, with a choir of 200 voices, one natural human voice, soaring, in full flight, without ever needing the support of a microphone, or any other form of amplification.

I never met the Professor in person. But I can still hear him, and his Bel canto singing.

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