

Chapter 2 Oswald Lim

From the ordinary, to the sublime

In September, 1958, I entered Form 1 at King's College. That year, classes were held at a temporary venue in Wan Chai. King's College building was being renovated. At the temporary school, we did not have music lessons.

Not that I would miss music lessons, any way. That year I was in the deepest pit. I had lost the one thing that had brought me so much joy, so much confidence. I had lost my voice.

In primary school, my voice was my life, my pride. I was a very good boy soprano, I was told. All my teachers said so. I won top prizes at the singing competitions at school. Even Professor Shao Guang, who taught at the Shanghai Conservatory before coming to Hong Kong in 1952, and who taught me at church many of the choruses of Handel's Messiah, said I was a very good singer.

By age 12, I could no longer sing the boy soprano range. No matter how hard I tried. My teachers kept saying that this was normal, that this would happen, because I was turning from a child into a teenager. But what is left of life, if I could no longer stand with my head held high and sing, to the warm and affectionate gazes of my admirers, and the jealous, bitter looks of those I defeated in competition.

That year, Form I, passed like a decade. I did not hate it. I just lived through it in a daze. I was no longer alive, I thought. Who needs hell? I was there. Hell was waking up, going through a day's activities with no joy, no hope.

In September, 1959, I started Form 2 at the renovated King's College building at Bonham Road, Hong Kong Island. Life definitely took a turn, for the better. We now had weekly music lessons under Mr Oswald Lim, my first music teacher at King's.

Mr Lim came into my life at a time when I most needed guidance and encouragement.

Not long after we began our music lessons, Mr Lim's announced that a junior choir would be formed.

"The junior choir will enter next year's choir competition in the Schools Music Festival," said Mr Lim.

"Are you going to audition?" asked Chan Ho Ming, my classmate who sat beside

me.

“Er..... I am not sure.....I am not sure I can sing....” I said, sheepishly.

“You should. You know music. You sure should,” he said.

“What if..... what if I don’t get selected?” I asked.

“So what if you are not selected? At least you’ve tried.” Ho Ming said.

That decision was taken out of our hands. Mr Lim did not ask us to volunteer for an audition. Everyone of us had to sing a song for him during the music lesson.

I was selected to join the junior choir.

I was overjoyed. “So I can still sing! Wow! There is still hope for me, this guy with the voice of a croaking frog.” I thought, my heart thumping in my chest.

“This is what you will sing.” said Mr Lim. He gave us a sheet of music, with five verses of words under the score. “We shall study it at our next lesson.”

‘The Happy Wanderer’ was written on top of the sheet of music.

I have often written about the importance of teaching our students the best music we can find, so that they will be inspired. I stand by this training concept. But what if we have to play music which we do not find inspiring? Throw the music sheet into the waste-paper basket, you might say. All right, but what if you HAVE to perform it, and just cannot avoid, or ignore it? There is only one way out - make the best of it.

To do so requires grit, and skill.

That was the case with ‘The Happy Wanderer.’ It was not bad music, not at all. The tune was catchy, the rhythm light and delicate, and the music builds up to a lovely climax, with the boy sopranos singing a thrilling descant above the main melody. But for some reason, after singing it a few times, some of my fellow choir members began to lose interest in it. They were not concentrating at all. This is because we had to sing the same melody from beginning to end, over and over again, five times! By the third verse some of us began to day dream. Other kept singing, but the singing had become routine and heartless. But we had no choice. This piece had to be sung by every school choir taking part in the competition.

Mr Oswald Lim, our music teacher, saw our reaction. He knew that if the members of the King's College junior choir lost interest, ‘The Happy Wanderer’ would sound repetitive, lifeless and boring. But there was no backing out - King’s

College's name had been put onto the list of competitors, and by hook or by crook he would have to rekindle our interest, and make us sing the song musically, with feeling. That was a tall order, for even I had begun to find the piece dull and boring by the time we sang the penultimate verse. By the last verse, everyone was looking visually bored, almost as though we wanted the song to end.

Mr Lim knew he had to do something, or the performance of the junior choir would be doomed.

He then came up with a rescue plan which, even to this date, I thought was a master's stroke.

"I now want you to put your music away, and think about the words of 'The Happy Wanderer'. What is this song all about?" asked Mr Lim.

It was actually a very simple story: the singer loves to wander, with a knapsack on his back. He visits many different places, climbing mountains, crossing streams, seeing beautiful scenery, meeting new, wonderful people. While he travels he sings this happy song, and thinks about life, and all its unpredictable surprises.....and so on..... There is actually not much to talk about, either the story, or the music, I thought.

"Now, let's use our imagination" said Mr Lim. "How should we begin the first verse? We begin to see someone coming, singing, with a knapsack on his back. Where would he be? Right in front of you? No? Then where?"

We began to focus, and suddenly, Mr Lim had made us think. He had captured our imagination! That was a brilliant move. The choir woke up, and started paying attention.

"May be he should be coming towards us.....from quite a distance...." said one member.

"Good" said Mr Lim. "If this traveler is coming towards you from a distance, how would his singing sound, from where you stand?"

A few hands shot up. "Er.....it should sound very soft.....then it gets louder and louder....."

"Good! You've got it! Now sing the first verse."

We began singing the first verse, but were stopped in the third bar.

"You call that soft? That was at least 'mf'. No. I want you all to begin 'ppp', then build up to 'pp', ending the first verse on 'p'."

We sang the first verse again. It took us a few tries to get the correct feel for this verse, singing 'ppp', then 'pp' and then 'p'.

"Second verse. Now the singer has come closer. We begin with 'p', then build up to 'mp' and then 'mf'. That is how we end the second verse." said our teacher.

We did that. Now we all got excited. We began to anticipate how we would treat the third verse.

"The singer is now singing happily right IN FRONT of you. You can smell his breath, share his joy and join his singing; 'f', 'ff', and a happy 'fff'! Now sing!.....No, no, no. Stop! I said SING! Not SHOUT! Try again."

The music room was now filled with the madness of a gang of happy, excited, bubbly thirteen/fourteen-year olds, singing, shouting, pushing, pulling, with joy.

"Quiet, you lot. We are having a choir practice. This is a music room, not Central Market." Mr Lim had great problems controlling our emotions.

"We now work on the ending."

"I know now..... we sing softer and softer and softer, with the singer going away....." said one student.

"That's all? Anything else?"

We gradually quiet down.

"Read the words of the last verse. What should be the mood of the departing wanderer?"

Now we were really quiet, thinking.

"I....I think he....he is....sad...." said one choir member.

"Sad. Right. Remember that. I want to hear sadness in your voice. Quiet sadness."

No body spoke. I knew some of us were asking in our hearts "How?", but no one spoke.

"When you sing the last verse, the volume should drop from 'mp' to 'p', finally to 'ppp' at the end. Almost a whisper. But not only that. When you sing this ending, think of something sad; then try to put the sadness in your voice."

The mood in the music room had completely changed.

“Now let us sing,” said Mr Lim.

It did not work out. Singing loud and happy was easy. Singing soft and sad was not. We could not do it. We had to work on it many, many times before there was a noticeable difference in our voices, from happiness to sadness. Some of us never quite got it, but then we just dropped our volume to a whisper, and ‘The Happy Wanderer’ faded into thin air.

The King’s College Junior Choir won first prize at the choral competition of the annual Schools Music Festival in 1959. We got a rating of over 90%. None of the other choirs got even close to our standard.

“..... I am particularly impressed by the way the King’s College choir interpreted this piece of music..... I heard the Happy Wanderer coming from a distance, singing happily before us, and then gradually fading into the distant sunset.....this was a brilliant performance..... congratulations, King’s College!” said the adjudicator.

I shall never forget that magical moment, when we shouted with joy, jumping up and down, hugging one another.

I shall never forget Mr Oswald Lim, my mentor, who showed me how to turn an ordinary composition into something magical, and sublime.

Gordon Siu
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