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A world-class choir

**You don't have to go to Austria to find a world-class choir. Ever heard of Malaysia's own Operafest Children's Choir?**

By SHOBA MANO

When she was 10 years old, Kam Sun-Yoke got wind of the fact that American singers and musicians were teaching music at a choir practice in a church in Madras Lane, Penang. She immediately auditioned for a part and got in.

That was back in 1950. The choir instilled in her such a great love for music that Kam went on to become an accomplished soprano who regularly performs abroad.

In 1986, she heard a children's choir at a school in Penang and was shocked at how bad they were. She decided to start the Operafest Children's Choir that same year.

"I wanted to give Malaysian youths a taste of culture and music. I didn't expect the children to exceed all my expectations," Kam said.

Today, the home-grown talents she nurtures have become a singing sensation abroad. Operafest Children's Choir has travelled to the US, Argentina, India, Australia, Macedonia, Greece, Spain, the UK, Holland, South Africa and China.



**Passionate performers:** Kam Sun-Yoke leading the Operafest Children's Choir. — MENG YEW CHOONG



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They made their debut in Wales, UK and Holland in 1986, winning trophies and acclaims.

“I took my choir to the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod in Wales because I wanted to see just how bad we were. To compete with Russians, Austrians and Americans can be a nerve-racking experience. Their costumes alone were enough to make my choir children’s jaws drop,” Kam recalled with a chuckle.

But she reassured her young wards that they were only there to learn from the best and told them to have a good time. Astonishingly, the kids did more than that. They won second place, missing out on first prize by only two points!

“After that, we crossed over from Wales to Holland for the International Koorfestival in Arnhem and won third place,” recalled Kam.

Not bad for a maiden performance abroad.

Although she is already 67, Kam shows no signs of slowing down. She resembles Maria Von Trappe from the movie *The Sound of Music* with her cropped hair, powerful voice, and tremendous influence over her wards, who these days regularly go abroad on roadshows and attend choral festivals.

“The tiny town of Missoula, in Montana, US, hosts an annual choral festival in which the whole town participates. The town receives about 200 applications from choir groups worldwide. In 2003, Operafest was among only 25 that were selected,” said Kam.

Led by her, Operafest included a few Malaysian songs in their performance, including the P. Ramlee classic *Getaran Jiwa*.

They have since sung before the president of Macedonia and the mayor of New York. In South Africa last year, they sang in schools and visited the Lesedi Cultural Village, where an African tribe astonished the Malaysians by singing *Burung Kakak Tua*. Operafest returned the honour by singing an African song.

“Our trips are also about cultural exchange. My children learn how to be ambassadors at a very early age. When we went to China in August, we chose the *Yellow River Piano Concerto* to be played by pianist Tan E-Jen, a former child prodigy,” related Kam.

Operafest added another feather to their cap in China when they performed without score sheets!

“To perform without score sheets requires a great connection between the musician and conductor. My maestro, Dr Jan Popper, says this is how a true conductor should lead,” explained Kam.

This is easier said than done, of course, said pianist Tan.

“I had returned from Britain and was teaching at the Yamaha Academy of Arts when I met Kam, who invited me to play with Operafest. She said creativity needs an outlet, and that outlet is to continuously perform. I agree. Even teachers need to perform

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so they can evolve and be better teachers. So I joined Operafest last year,” said Tan.

Kam stressed that without expression through performance, talent dies. An accomplished soprano herself, Kam was the first Malaysian to be invited to sing at the Barcelona Music Festival in 1995, where Jose Carreras himself once performed. She flies abroad regularly to perform in Ukraine, Macedonia and other countries, but her choir children are always close to her heart.

She would like them to become caring members of society, and that is why she introduces them to the plight of animals and the destitute. In India (in 2004), she and the children encountered an “untouchable” woman who was afraid to come near them. So Kam made the first move and went to sit by her.

“I wanted to show the children that there is no such thing as a dirty human being or animal, but only dirty hearts that commit cruel acts,” she said.

Kam wishes Malaysia would open up more avenues for the arts and encourage outstanding talent, such as those in Operafest.

“Several children in the Operafest Choir received scholarship offers to pursue their music studies in Austria and the US. But all of their parents turned down the scholarships for fear that their children would have no future in music or the arts when they graduated and returned to Malaysia. This is a sad situation.

“I also hope the corporations will be more forthcoming and sponsor our concerts and that the Malaysian public will support us by coming to watch our shows. They need not be afraid that operettas and choirs are only for Anglophiles.

“Our concerts have been adapted to include many pop and local folk songs, which breaks with *de rigueur*, even to the delight of traditionalists,” said Kam.

## **Operafest sings for furry friends**

The Operafest Children’s Choir will replicate the performance they had in China (in August) at a charity concert called *One Bow-Wow, One Heart*.

The performance at 8pm at the Lake Club in Kuala Lumpur on Sept 29, is to raise funds for the Furry Friends Farm (FFF), a no-kill animal shelter in Kundang, Selangor.

“I am very interested in how ‘my children’ turn out in life. I’d like them to remain grounded and not be taken in by the awards and international recognition they have achieved through the choir,” said the choirs’ founder Kam Sun-Yoke, who insists the children learn to give back to society.

Kam feels Malaysians spend the least effort, resources and funds on animal welfare, and hence the Furry Friends charity concert they are undertaking. It is not the first such project by them.

In December 2005, the Operafest Children’s Choir held a concert and charity fair called *Trumpeting for Elephants* in Aid

of A.P.E.S. (Awareness and Preservation of Elephants' Survival), where they shared the stage with singer Zainal Abidin, who is also a great lover of nature and wildlife.

"I finance an animal shelter in Taiping, Perak," revealed Kam.

"This happened after I read about the plight of a 60-year-old widow who has sacrificed her life to look after stray dogs. This lady had about 80 dogs when she was about to be evicted from her rented home. She was retrenched and had used up all her savings too.

"So I helped her obtain a four-acre plot of land, which is large enough for her dogs to run around in. Today, it operates as a shelter for strays and abused animals," said Kam.


The charity concert at the Lake Club will provide Malaysians an opportunity to experience a world-class performance at an admission price of RM30. The concert will include Franz Lehar's *Merry Widow* operetta, as well as Chinese folk songs like *Jasmine Flower* and *Sweetheart* and Malay and American pop songs.

Former child prodigy, pianist Tan-E-Jen, will also perform the *Yellow River Piano Concerto* with the Operafest Children's Choir, just as they did in China – without a score sheet.

According to Tan, Kam's style is very unique as she has managed to introduce Asian flavours into choral music. Also, Operafest children dance, which is unusual for choirs.

"Mrs Kam blends Asian songs into choral music and has the children dance in a way I have never experienced. She is constantly challenging my creativity," said Tan.

"Malaysians should be proud that a home-grown choir is leading the way for choral music internationally by pioneering our own East-West fusion," said Tan.

*The Ronald McDonald's Children's Charities Fund of Malaysia is sponsoring 100 tickets and 170 meals for some children. To purchase tickets for the show, write to [remembersheena@gmail.com](mailto:remembersheena@gmail.com) or call  016-631 9018 .*

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