

Zubir Said and the Strohmenger Piano

By Sylvia Khoo

The late Zubir Said (1907-1987) not only composed Singapore's national anthem, *Majulah Singapura* (Onward Singapore), on a grand Strohmenger piano, but also the Children's Day song, *Semoga Bahagia* (May You Achieve Happiness). This piano was the platform from which sprang hundreds of his musical compositions and from which numerous musical aspirants were nurtured. The piano is part of the permanent collection of the National Museum of Singapore, but is currently on loan to the Malay Heritage Centre. It is displayed in the exhibition gallery that traces the development of the Malay music industry. When the National Museum of Singapore held a special exhibition in 2010 titled *Singapore 1960*, this piano was one of the exhibition's star pieces and was fittingly situated next to the portrait of the swearing-in of Singapore's first prime minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

Zubir Said was born in West Minangkabau, Sumatra. In 1928, he joined a *keroncong* (an Indonesian style of music) group where he learned to play the violin and travelled throughout Sumatra. He arrived in Singapore during the same year and joined the *bangsawan* (often referred to as Malay opera) troupe, City Opera. In 1936 he worked with the record company HMV. By the late 1940s, the Malay film industry in Singapore had started to flourish and was playing a major role in producing composers, with Zubir Said becoming one of the most prolific. In 1949 he was Orchestra Conductor with Malay Film Productions Ltd, owned by the Shaw Brothers. In the early 1950s, he switched to Cathay-Keris Film Productions as Music Director and was with the company until 1964. The period between the 1940s and the 1960s was deemed the Golden Age of Singapore Cinema.

Said composed the musical scores and songs for some of the most iconic and memorable films in Singapore's film history, films such as *Sumpah Pontianak* (Curse of the Vampire), *Sri Mersing* (Beauty of Mersing) and *Chuchu Datok Merah* (the Granddaughter of Datok Merah), and worked with celebrated singers, actors and actresses including P Ramlee, Saloma,



Zubir Said's piano, photo courtesy of the Malay Heritage Centre

Nona Asiah, Abdullah Cik, R Ismail, amongst many others.

During the 1950s, he was widely regarded as a talented music composer who incorporated not only the indigenous music of the region, but also elements of western and other Asian music into his compositions. In 1958, the mayor of Singapore recommended to the City Council that Zubir Said compose the song to mark the official opening of the Victoria Memorial Hall and Victoria Theatre. Thus the song, *Majulah Singapura*, was born.

On 30 May 1959, Singapore attained self-government after 140 years of British rule, and Lee Kuan Yew became its first prime minister. Singapore was a new nation composed of people of different racial origins. It was recognised that symbols were needed to unite them. The ultimate symbol to achieve that goal was a national anthem that would reflect the country's dreams and aspirations. The singing of a country's anthem always stirs emotions. The search began for an anthem and

Majulah Singapura was chosen for its exhortations of looking ahead, with a hope for success and happiness, united in a new spirit of working as one people.

On 11 November 1959, *Majulah Singapura* was officially declared the national anthem of Singapore and on 3 December 1959, the anthem made its debut at the installation of Yusof bin Ishak as the Yang di Pertuan Negara, Singapore's head of state. The national anthem is sung every day in schools during the flag-raising ceremony and on special occasions such as Singapore's National Day on 9 August.

To Zubir Said, the strength of a country lay in its people. Hence the first line of the anthem begins with "*Mari kita rakyat Singapura*" – Come, we the people of Singapore.

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Photo courtesy of the Malay Heritage Centre