

# P. Ramlee's music revisited and remixed

Composed by Julian Wong, the P. Ramlee Suite is a tribute to the late entertainer and will include some of his favourite songs

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Music Correspondent

Singapore composer Julian Wong was in secondary school when he fell in love with the music of Malay entertainment icon P. Ramlee.

A schoolmate, who was from the late singer, actor and director's birth state of Penang, was always singing one of his most famous songs, *Getaran Jiwa* (Soul Vibration).

"The song is beautiful and I found the lyrics and melodies to be very sweet," says Wong, 30, who is also an arranger and music director.

He then got into P. Ramlee's films and songs from the 1950s and 1960s, commonly referred to as the golden age of Malay cinema.

"I love P. Ramlee's music as much as I love Bach and Beethoven."

When home-grown chamber orchestra re: mix approached him to compose a new classical piece in a tribute to P. Ramlee, Wong jumped at the chance.

re: mix will perform the composition, P. Ramlee Suite, together with Max Richter's *Vivaldi Four Seasons Recomposed*, their re-interpretation of the *Four Seasons* concerto, at re: composed, a concert at the Esplanade Recital Studio on April 29.

Foo Say Ming, music director of re: mix, says taking on P. Ramlee's music is in line with its ethos of merging classical music with popular songs from various cultures.

At the upcoming show, the group, known for classical renditions of songs such as Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* and the Bee Gees' *Emotion*, will also launch its second CD, *Wild And In Love*.

Foo, 52, who is also the head of strings at **Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts' (Nafa)** School of Music, first violinist at the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) and assistant conductor at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Symphony Orchestra, says: "We have always looked into Chinese and Taiwanese music and we've always had this interest to look into Malay and Indonesian music."

"P. Ramlee was always in the project somewhere, but it was always about finding the right occasion and the right person to do it."

He found the ideal candidate in Wong, who had worked as composer and music director for theatre productions such as *Liao Zhai Rocks!* and *Tropicana The Musical* as well as concerts such as *ChildAid*.

Wong is dedicating the suite to his mentor, Cultural Medallion recipient Iskandar Mirza Ismail, a composer and musician who died of cancer in 2014.

Iskandar's mother, Nona Asiah, who was also conferred the Cul-



Home-grown chamber orchestra re: mix, led by its music director Foo Say Ming (standing, right), will perform the P. Ramlee Suite composed by Julian Wong (standing, left). PHOTO: LIN ZHAOWEI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

tural Medallion award in 2016, worked with P. Ramlee in the Malay movie and music industry.

While Wong's secondary schoolmate introduced him to P. Ramlee's heart-rending dramas such as *Anakku Sazali* (My Son, Sazali, 1956) and *Penarek Becha* (The Trishaw Man, 1956), it was in his current job as a music teacher at the Institute of Technical Education that he discovered the late icon's comedic work such as the *Bujang Lapok* series of movies.

He says: "The interesting thing about P. Ramlee is that Malay teenagers today know his work so well. My students can recite every line, every lyric, every song."

"To me, although P. Ramlee was Malaysian, all his best music and films were made in Singapore. I think of him as a Singaporean icon. When you watch his films, you see places such as the Victoria Memorial Hall and Tanjong Pagar."

P. Ramlee Suite will have music from some of his favourite songs, such as *Azizah*, *Jangan Tinggal Daku* (Don't Leave Me) and *Senandung*

*Malam* (Night Serenade). The late entertainer died of a heart attack in 1973 at the age of 44.

"The first movement is in a sonata form, the last movement is in a rondo form and there are elements of a violin concerto because P. Ramlee was a violinist himself," Wong says.

"The biggest challenge for me is to not do too much and to not do too little. I didn't want to do an experimental or intellectual piece."

"I wanted people who knew the music to be able to recognise it, but then go, 'Oh that's different, I never knew it could be presented that way.'"

The core of P. Ramlee's work, Wong adds, is that he always wore his heart on his sleeve, whether in his film or music.

"If they were sentimental, if they were romantic, they were unabashedly so. When I approached his work, I felt I had to be in the same spirit as how he looked at his music and films."

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## BOOKIT / RE: COMPOSED

WHERE: Esplanade Recital Studio, 1 Esplanade Drive  
WHEN: April 29, 7.30pm  
ADMISSION: \$20, e-mail 2006remix@gmail.com