

EDITORIAL

To the Filipino composer as National Artist in a Modernizing Milieu

In December 1997, on that very same day my teacher Jose Maceda was formally being declared National Artist, I was in Bangkok as a composer-participant representing the Philippines at the *Third ASEAN Composers Forum on Traditional Music* (ASEAN-COCI, 1998). Half regretting the fact that I had missed a very significant event back home, I had come face-to-face with the rigors of a kind of “cosmopolitanism” coming from my government and from the governments of the other ASEAN nations. This cosmopolitanism is just as Benedict Anderson described it in a lecture¹, that governments tell other nations about themselves, just as, I might add, those same governments in effect also tell their citizens “what they (the citizens) are.” I realized therefore, that I was taking part directly in a festival that was as much a “political”, as it was a “cultural” one. I had composed two new works that were to be “modern” yet reflected my local “tradition”; just as my counterparts from other ASEAN nations did the same. The ASEAN Composers Forum on Traditional Music, by its very nature and mode of production, was an effort to cover grounds of tradition and modernity, categories that—along those of “nations and national boundaries”; of “identities and cultural difference”—are fraught with critique, and yet here made to re-function according to government agendas. Trying to make sense of all of those, I asked: how would I locate the national artist project of my government along its agenda of “nation building”?

It was such an irony that through the course of that festival in 1997, all ASEAN currencies depleted against the US Dollar; so that all of us participants, midway through the various activities of the composers forum, had to come face-to-face with the devaluation of our respective local currencies. Reflecting on the ontology of my participation which confronted me conceptually, I wrote Maceda an endearing congratulatory email that same evening, alluding that he deserved more than a national artist award, and having endeared a certain openness, wrote him about this “cosmopolitan” nature of government cultural projects such as what I was, at

¹Benedict Anderson’s lecture at the University of the Philippines College of Social Sciences and Philosophy entitled *The French Connection: Rizal, Decadence and Revolutionary Anarchism* (January 2004) mentions “the need of nations to tell other nations about itself to be acceptable to the ‘family of nations’” (pp. 1-2).

that time, presently doing. I then conflated all those with the national artist “project”, and the news of the depletion in value of the Philippine peso. This communication with Maceda opened both of us to a stream of continued discussions in subsequent years. I have put together some of the significant points of those discussions in the concluding article of this volume, focusing on the composers’ towering work *Ading*.

I feel so grateful to have been assigned the task of guest editing Volume 10 of *Musika Journal*, dedicated to the Filipino composer as national artist, for such endeavor creates an opportunity to revisit my interest in cultural politics. It is interesting to read through all the articles and how their respective authors have each created images of every composer, all within the backdrop of the Philippine society and its mechanisms of being a modern nation-state. With the national artist project itself being a significant institution in the creation of emblems that tell the world what the Philippines “is”—in the broadest sense of the word—the various perspectives advanced by the authors also echo to us the current discourses on national culture.

Arwin Tan draws from Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital in investigating Lucrecia Kasilag’s explorations and formulations through her compositions of a “Filipino sound.” Jocelyn Guadalupe, on the other hand, looks more into the personality of Lucio D. San Pedro, whom she considers to be the archetype of conservatism and resistance to a modernity which to him is an outside encroachment. Mauricia D. Borromeo’s article on Francisco Feliciano centers on his “nationalistic” works like the opera *La Loba Negra* to illustrate a nationalism as cultivated by a composer whose craftsmanship is associated with a more international style. The more biographical nature of Edna Marcil Martinez’ article on Antonino Buenaventura and Katherine Valdellon-Molina’s article on Antonio J. Molina demonstrate how a kind of nationalism grew out of in the life experiences of those national artists. Quite unique in presentation is Elena R. Mirano’s article on Felipe Padilla de Leon, which simulates a first-hand encounter on the life and work of this composer through the words of his son Felipe de Leon Jr.

Most notable is Verne de la Peña’s article on Ramon P. Santos’ piece *Panaghoy sa Isang Bayaning Pinaslang*. Situating this contemporary work that honors the most popular Marcos nemesis Benigno Aquino, Jr., slain within the darkest days of the dictatorship, the article revolves around the notion of liminality as evident in the compositional structure, the very place of this

particular work within the composer's roster of outputs, as well as in the conditions of production and performance.

I find it quite significant to have requested a national artist to write about one composer who, despite not having qualified for the honor for mere technical reasons, is highly revered undoubtedly by all. Ramon P. Santos' article on four of the most important works of Nicanor Abelardo demonstrate how this highly esteemed composer, known for raising the standards in the writing of the *kundiman* (a classic form of Filipino love song), had actually ushered in a modernism in Philippine music that was carried-over in subsequent generations following him.

To see the national artist project as part of a broad *gesamtkunstwerk*, that is "national culture", is to conflate this project with an even broader project: **nationhood**. But how do we in turn draw from the achievements of the national artists to further advance the cause of the nation itself, very much buried into the quagmire of the global political economy? Trade liberalization, the "stagnation" and "deindustrialization" of the Philippine economy (conditions outlined in Bello, 2009) due to the weakening of local industries, the monopoly of foreign corporations, the lack of safety nets for local enterprises; and therefore the lack of local companies to absorb surplus labor are but part of ongoing conditions that locate the Philippines in a peripheral place within the global order. In those conditions, the country remains to be a mere cheap source of labor and raw materials, answering to foreign debts made by the powerful ruling class; conditions that are reinforced by the perennial feudal/neo-feudal structure of society. Would artists have the capacity to institute concrete changes to address those economic conditions, or do we merely echo the already perennial economic conditions reinforced by a status quo which had largely rewarded us with such an honor?

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