

A Musical Journey of Poetic Endearments

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The inaugural George Town Literary Festival 2011 in Penang, Malaysia, came to a successful close with acoustic fingerstyle guitarist-composer Az Samad's solo guitar performance on 27 November 2011. Held at The Canteen and Bar of the newly opened China House at Beach Street, Az Samad's performance brought together many connoisseurs as well as aficionados of the arts, literary, theatre, and music community from around the island in support and celebration of the festival.

One may simply read this musical performance as an ornamental item to enliven a festival of multicultural and multilingual literary origins in which the artsy-fartsy folks operating their usual culture-vulture habits were entertained with live jazzy guitar music while they exchanged ideas and possibly networked one last time before bidding their farewell. One may question what does music have to do with literature, or what do both disciplines have in common. It dawned on me that a parallel may be drawn between literary works and musical productions, as both are objet d'art, artefacts of creative inventions in which the elements of narrative are among numerous common fundamental characteristics in literature and music. While narratives are documented in printed text as in the form of novels and poetry, the unfolding of narrative contents in a piece of musical art work is presented through the agency of sounds, melody, harmony, and even text itself via aural transmission. Hence, producer Chee Sek-Thim's inclusion of a live solo guitar performance by Az Samad as the

festival's culminating event is a succinct manifestation of his intention to creating "a platform for art practitioners to showcase their works, hold dialogues and exchange ideas." With this notion Chee pushed his ideals a step further through Az Samad's poetic reading of his original musical compositions.

Chee's choice of musician for this event is most appropriate in several respects. First and foremost, Az is not only a highly accomplished guitarist, he is also a composer who writes music which vividly tells a story. Furthermore, Az comes from a celebrity literary family; his father is none other than the eminent Malaysian National Laureate Datuk A. Samad Said. Az says he grew up living and sleeping between books and "often recited my father's poetry in school." He gives full credit to his father for having a keen interest in poetry, and identifies his father's works and work ethics as a source of inspiration. These formative elements have definitive influence on him as clearly reflected in his musical productions – a balanced, poetic blend of musical narratives delivered through top notch performance techniques. These characteristics therefore made Az the producer's absolute first choice to grace the festival's closing program.

With much publicity on the performance, the Canteen and Bar quickly filled up with an enthusiastic crowd ranging from different age groups. Upon curator Bernice Chauly's introduction, Az came on the make shift stage, addressed his eager audience, and immediately went on to captivate them with his electrifying virtuosic performance. It is often believed that impressive opening numbers are the determining factor of the success story of a live performance; interestingly Az's concert program for the evening proved otherwise – it was a line-up of musical items which displayed a sincere, modest presentation of his stories. His first piece *Hit Me Up*, beginning with a quiet, unimposing percussive introduction built on a few pickings on the steel strings, playful hitting and slapping on the body of the guitar as if the guitarist is rousing his instrument to come alive, is truly a piece to be reckoned with. The moment the main thematic idea kicked in, Az unveiled his virtuosity through various fingerstyle techniques, such as *rasgueado* – a finger strumming technique generally

associated with Spanish Flamenco guitar music, rhythmic tapping and slapping on the body of the instrument with great precision, and percussive plucking – which instantaneously ignited fervent applause from the audience. Az was literally a one-man ensemble in which he was not only the bass player, he was also the instrumentalist for the main theme or melodic lines, the accompanist who provided harmonic support, and last but not least the ever obligatory percussionist. The entire performance had a strong theatrical trait as visual element is an essential component in fingerstyle guitar.

Besides such exhilarating musical language, simple unassuming lyricism marks another facet of his compositional style. Az's lyricism is best demonstrated in two particular works namely, *Letter from Tahoe*, a piece inspired by the beautiful landscape of North Lake Tahoe which he has visited, and *The C Factor*. The first piece has a clear formal structure which houses four simple lines that are variedly repeated: a reminiscent of the unspoiled terrain of North Lake Tahoe. Despite its "rockish" middle section, *The C Factor* projects some definitive characteristics of Celtic/Irish folk music. Its incessant oscillating melodic gestures are created by seamless undulating riff-like figures played in contrasting registers, thus creating a trance like aural experience that is also kaleidoscopic in its timbre.

These pieces verify Az's versatility as a musician-composer; this may be substantiated by the wide ranging musical styles and technical skills that he displayed with ease throughout the entire evening. As a late learner who bought his first guitar – a blue sunburst *kapok* – with the RM80 his grandmother gave him and signed up for guitar lessons under the Associated Board of the Royal School of Music (ABRSM) syllabus at the age of 15, Az actually progressed at a remarkable pace. Upon graduating with a Bachelor of Music in music arrangement from University of Westminster in 2003 at the age of 22, Az went on to further his music education majoring in jazz composition and performance as well as jazz studies at Berklee College of Music in Boston and San Jose State University in California respectively. In less than a decade, Az has attained an exceptionally high level of performance virtuosity and compositional competency as manifested in his original CD recording releases.

As a sensitive and highly perceptive musician, Az finds inspiration in his surroundings, in the people he meets, and places he visits. All his life experiences are passionately imprinted onto every pitch, every harmonic nuance, and every rhythmic cell in his music; listening to him play is comparable to reading his stories. For instance, *Lagu Royalti Belum Datang* – a piece dedicated to his father, is also a musical caricature of the National Laureate. Throughout the piece one could hear Datuk A. Samad Said's anxiousness and concerns for the late arrival of his royalty. Az has also written a piece for his mother titled *Irama Espanyola* which displays exuberant vigour as well as uncompromising rhythmic precision and clarity. It is interesting to note that Az has chosen Spanish musical idioms as the fundamentals for writing this piece for his mother. I would like to take the liberty to view this as his personal approach in associating his early compositional style – Spanish – with the first woman in his life – his mother; a wonderful endearment to his first loves indeed.

Penyair (1973) is a piece based on a poem of the same title by Datuk A. Samad Said which reads as follows:

Kepada setiap [To every]
penyair gundah [sad poet]
daun gugur pun [even the falling leaf]
sentiasa indah [is always beautiful]

By using quiet lyricism and transparent texture, Az has successfully conjured up a sense of bitter sweet sentiments to depict a forlorn poet's train of thought and susceptibilities as transpired in his father's words. Incidentally, through all its polyphonic lines and rich harmonies one hears Az – his interpretation of his father's verse.

On the whole, the entire program of this event is essentially Az's autobiography, presented in a different kind of text through the agency of musical elements. Every piece performed is a chapter in his "book," each with its unique thematic materials and

characteristics which are meticulously phrased and rhymed to best convey his story. And he shared his stories most passionately, reading through each one of his chapters with his eyes closed, a smile on his face, and he moved – stepping and swaying as his stories prompted him. Literally speaking, Az performs not only for his audience, he also reiterates his stories for himself to savour its every little detail and to meditate upon them. Although his works are completed compositions, his performance always projects an unmistakable improvisatory nature which is an inherent element in jazz, and a style commonly associated with Flamenco guitar music.

Az has a wonderful sense of humour; he is very charming, approachable, humble and easy to be around with. He is open-minded, down-to-earth and always delighted to share his thoughts and experiences which he does so well through his creative musical art and performance skills. While his stories are being transmitted through the mass media on the international platform, Az's musical excellence continues to bring him endless accolades... and Malaysia is so very proud to have a prodigious son in Az.



Photo 1 Az Samad telling his stories through his fingerstyle guitar compositions at the Canteen and Bar, China House.

Source: Photo by Courtesy of Julian "Lefty" Kam.