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Aryo Wicaksono : Opening minds through music

Bruce Emond , THE JAKARTA POST , JAKARTA | Fri, 05/08/2009 1:22 PM | People



Courtesy of Aryo Wicaksono

As a young boy with a passion for music and few outlets to fill his creative urges, Aryo Wicaksono would head to the pirated cassette stalls in his native Surabaya.

There, among the pop and dangdut music, the budding pianist could find rare cassette recordings of such classical music greats as Ashkenazy, Horowitz and, a personal favorite, the Argentinian Martha Argerich.

Aryo, now 26 and living in Arizona, where he teaches in the local public school system and also is part of the Swara Sonora Trio, has met Argerich several times, most recently in Los Angeles earlier this year. He says it was interesting that after a Ravel concerto performance at the LA Philharmonic Argerich chose to hang out with him and a few other music students and a dancer, discussing her family, life and food.

He describes her as humble, warm and very human, with an openness different from his experiences at home. It's his hope that classical music can be brought down from its pedestal and made accessible to those who want to learn more about it.

"I felt disappointed in my early years to face an attitude where it seems classical music is something that has to be 'special, elite and only for a few' and not everyone can learn it," he says in an email interview. "This act of snobbishness will kill positive growth and the image of classical music and the image of classical music to the general public and definitely will not make Indonesian musicians learn to be better musicians and human beings."

Aryo started out studying the Yamaha electone at an early age; he didn't realize it at the time, but he had perfect pitch, and he would copy and harmonize the melodies he heard from TV shows.

The musical talent ". didn't come from my family", he says of his mechanical engineer father and his mother, a clinical pharmacist.

"My mom and dad were supportive, and tried as much as they could to get some interesting CDs of classical music for me. Basically, it was a diverse beginning, not a purely classical one, but I started to listen more and more to classical music and enjoy it."

He acknowledges he was fortunate to go with his mother to the United States, where she was on a USAID scholarship at the University of California, in 1999. He studied at the USC Magnet Public High School in a college prep program for gifted students.

Upon his move to the States, Aryo describes feeling a "pure insatiable hunger" to find the resources he had been looking for in university and public libraries, "just listening and learning all the time, reading, reading and reading .".

"To be honest, I think what I like and appreciate in the US is the ability of just about anyone to go to a public library, or state university library, and just listen to or check out CDs or books," he says.

"Almost anyone has equal access to learn if one wants to. And there is an attitude of community learning and sharing that I didn't find back home."

In 2004, as a graduate student at the University of Arizona, Aryo began teaching music to first graders in the Tucson public school system in a program called Opening Minds through the Arts. He tries to keep the lessons fun for the students, who are mostly from working class backgrounds and do not have access to Western classical music in their homes.

"We approach the music and the kids in a way that the classical music is something that's normal, regular and not elitist," says Aryo, who graduated in 2006. "Of course, we lay down the basic rules of discipline and behavior, but it we are far from stiff and formal. We have fun, we joke around, we smile."

He believes that, with some adjustments, such a program can be implemented in Indonesia, and points out that there is already a similar one operating in Surabaya called Sanggar Alang-Alang.

"Of course, the language would have to be different and the learning structure would have to be modified slightly. The US secondary school system is probably based more on action, learning by observing and doing, while the Indonesian system is probably still on the old French/European rote way of learning. Both have their positive and negative sides."

Aryo says he misses Indonesia, especially the food, good weather and relaxed atmosphere. But he will be back in August when, as part of the Swara Sonora Trio along with opera singers and fellow Opening Minds Through the Arts members Kathryn Mueller and Nathan Krueger, he will perform in Jakarta, Surabaya and Bali to raise money for UNICEF Indonesia.

He is quick to point out that selecting the name of the group - Swara for sound, Sonora for the Sonoran desert in Arizona - was a joint effort and combines elements of both Indonesia and the States.

"We want to emphasize the multicultural, peace and collaborative friendship in our artistic and public mission," he says. "This is a non-profit, no-paid tour, and we want to donate all the money from our concerts in Indonesia toward children's education and growth, which is why we chose UNICEF and, hopefully, some other organizations as well as our recipients."

The trio also will conduct several master classes where, no doubt, they will meet several Aryos of the future. He says aspiring Indonesian talents do not have to go abroad to develop themselves, but they should study hard, always keep an open mind and be curious and never give up in their pursuit of learning.

"Always believe that what you have is unique," he says. "Not everyone will have a *glamorous' career, because that is a combination of talent, hard work and luck, but when we are desperate and feeling like a failure, we should sit back and think about what we have. And if we really love what we do, we can really find ways to live, exist and express ourselves with what we have learned in music and life."

To find out more about the Swara Sonora Trio and its tour of Indonesia,

visit <http://www.swarasonora.com>.