

HK Phil 50+

Jimmy Shiu



Contents

Foreword by David Cogman, Chairman of the Board of Governors	xi
Preface	xiii
1. Evolution of the Outfit	1
2. Making the ‘Rite’ Move . . .	10
3. Exploring the Storeroom	20
4. Posting the Posthorn	29
5. Playing Out of Sight	30
6. An Orchestra ‘All Over the Place’	31
7. Gentle Reminder	39
8. Special Sites, Special Shows	40
9. Great Hall of the People	50
10. See You in the Lobby	51
11. A Catalogue of Mishaps	53
12. A Hybrid of Absentmindedness and Intelligence	59

Contents

13. A Bang on the Bass	60
14. Between 1 and 2	61
15. The Audience Has Mishaps Too!	63
16. Ping-Pong Concerto – Who Wants to Be a Soloist?	64
17. The Different Cimbalom	70
18. Made for Each Other	71
19. The Diva	83
20. How ‘Hong Kong’ Is the Phil?	85
21. Miss Hong Kong	95
22. The Flagship Orchestra at the Flagship Theme Park	97
23. Wunderkinder	99
24. Music Therapy for Rachel	109
25. Tunefully Ever After	111
26. Backstage Masseurs	118
27. Evolution of the Ticket	119
28. Real-Name Tickets	126
29. Subscriptions of Yesteryear	128
30. Moments of Sentiment	132

31. Silent Applause	143
32. The Bet	144
33. A Romantic Orchestra	145
34. When the Sky Isn't Blue	147
35. Philip's Fanfare	161
36. Hello, Nínhão, Kamusta, Annyeonghaseyo	163
37. Jaap's Asian Connections	169
38. Filemon's Hong Kong Love Song	171
39. Pop Goes the Phil	173
40. Genius at Work	189
41. The Doppelganger	202
42. Yo-Yo Ma	204
43. Masters from Early Years	207
44. The Joy of Sharing	215
45. Our Own Opuses	223
46. Half of Chan Wing Wah's Symphonic Opuses	228
47. Musical Farmer	230
48. The School Supervisor Who Oversubscribes	242

Contents

49. Guinness World Record	244
50. Words from the Aficionados	246
Epilogue: Back Where We Began	258
Appendix	264
Acknowledgements	291

Foreword

Before it became a professional orchestra in 1974, the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra was an amateur society, founded to bring together classical music enthusiasts of different social groups in Hong Kong. This book tells the remarkable story of how, in just half a century, it became a leading international orchestra.

The orchestra's development has, in many ways, mirrored the rise of its home, Hong Kong: it drew on the best of both Western and Chinese talent, yet developed its own unique culture. The story of the orchestra is really the story of the people who supported it – the players, the conductors, the management, the sponsors and of course the audience. We are deeply indebted to Jimmy Shiu, our former audience development manager, for telling the story of those people in this book. In the following pages, he traces the orchestra's rise over the past fifty years (and more), sharing a wealth of anecdotes garnered from behind the scenes.

In any story there are important turning points. One very significant one for the HK Phil was its four-year journey through recording Wagner's *Ring* cycle under our previous music director, Maestro Jaap van Zweden, which won praise from critics around the world and in 2019 made us the first orchestra in Asia to be awarded 'Orchestra of the Year' by the prestigious UK classical music magazine *Gramophone*. A more recent turning point came in our 50th season, we announced the appointment of the brilliant Finnish conductor Tarmo Peltokoski as our next music director: our eagerly-awaited first recording with him will be released in the 2025/26 season.

That the orchestra came this far was due as much to the ensemble off the stage as on the stage. We have been fortunate to have a number of long-term friends on this journey: the HK Phil would not

Foreword

exist today without the kind support we receive from our generous sponsors and donors. Though I cannot list them all, I would like to thank two in particular. We have been the fortunate beneficiaries of the HKSAR Government's vision and commitment: it realised many years ago that an international city needed international cultural institutions and was willing to invest to develop them. Through the Culture, Sports and Tourism Bureau, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department and their predecessors, it was the earliest and most committed of the HK Phil's supporters: one could not ask for a better partner. We are also deeply grateful to our principal patron, the Swire Group, that has since 2006 supported the HK Phil's vision and mission.

I would like to say a special word of thanks to Andy Simon, our principal clarinet, who generously sponsored the production of the English edition of this book. Few people have a longer history with, or a deeper commitment to the HK Phil: he has brought almost four decades of passion and energy to the orchestra.

An orchestra exists, above all, for its audience: the friends for whom it plays each week. While commemorating our fiftieth anniversary, I would like to thank all the audiences that have supported and encouraged the orchestra over the decades. I hope this 50th anniversary publication will bring you pleasant memories of everything the HK Phil has achieved so far, and I hope it inspires us to achieve yet more in the years to come.

David Cogman
Chairman, Board of Governors
The Hong Kong Philharmonic Society Limited

Preface

The date was 31 January 1978.¹ Some fifteen members of my school's music club were invited to attend a concert at St. Paul's Convent School. In those days, it was uncommon for boys' school students to visit a girls' school. With some excitement, we stepped into the grand school hall. As we moved towards the first row (graciously reserved for us), it was nerve-racking to be gazed upon by hundreds of girls seated quietly, waiting for the concert to start.

I had only heard of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra (HK Phil) before, but now, their fifty to sixty musicians were right in front of me. Just one step forward, and I could have shaken hands with the concertmaster. That was amazing! But the more overwhelming moment was yet to come . . .

A charming lady appeared on stage and eloquently introduced the programme in English. I heard my schoolmates murmuring enthusiastically, 'Wow! Miss Hong Kong!' Then I realised that standing right before my very eyes was Ethel Lau, the second runner-up of the Miss Hong Kong Pageant of 1973.

I must say, aside from the feelings of being a boy in a girls' school and bumping into Miss Hong Kong – I have little recollection of what happened at the concert. There were about five pieces, one of which was narrated by Ethel. That could have been Benjamin Britten's *The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*. The programme sheet was in English. The only tune I knew was *Dance of the Yao People*. That was courtesy of my second-oldest brother, a school band clarinetist who kept playing the tune at home! I cannot recall who the conductor was. I have found no information in the orchestra's archive. However, in that particular season, the Principal Conductor and Music Director

¹ The exact date of that concert was provided by my elder brother, who has been keeping a diary since school days. He was then-chairman of the music club and leader of that visit.

Preface

Hans Günter Mommer frequently brought the orchestra to schools. I may have had the good fortune of watching him live!

Looking back, that first encounter with the orchestra was in fact a prelude to my magical HK Phil journey.

Four years later, I was a fervent music-lover and attended HK Phil's concerts regularly. I preferred to sit in the first row (partly for a 'nostalgic' St. Paul's Convent feel, and partly because the ticket price was the lowest). Once, Benedict Cruft, the first associate concertmaster, nodded to this 'loyal fan', which made me feel that I was part of the orchestra.

Ten years later, that was not just a feeling. After finishing my master's studies, I successfully applied to be the orchestra's audience development manager. The guy who enthusiastically clapped for the musicians was now their colleague! And forty-plus years later, I am writing a book to commemorate the HK Phil's 50th anniversary, which came with a chance to interview that Miss Hong Kong contestant – Ethel!

Like me, thousands of music lovers have their own HK Phil stories. This book is a compilation of these stories, which I hope may further enlighten us about our orchestra, orchestral music in general, and the development of music in Hong Kong.

Fifty Dishes

To publish this book, I gathered stories from interviews, old documents, clippings, and printed materials, among other media. I grouped similar content such as ticket prices, performance venues, the orchestra's recordings, soloists, audience development, and pop concerts into separate categories. Then, twenty-two main dishes were cooked up from the ingredients, accompanied by twenty-eight bite-size titbits, making it fifty!

50+

This book marks the 50th anniversary of HK Phil as a professional performance body. However, it also touches on its predecessors.

The Sino-British Orchestra (SBO) was inaugurated in 1947 and gave its first concert the following year. In 1957, HK Phil was founded and most former SBO members became HK Phil players. The orchestra operated for seventeen years before turning professional in 1974. To find out more about the relationship between SBO and HK Phil, please read *港樂血緣報告* ('Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra's Bloodline', an online article in Chinese) written by Mr Leon Chu.

Since HK Phil's roots go back to 1947 (even 1946 – the year when its parent organisation Sino-British Society was established), I was tempted to make it a '50+' book to include titbits from those twenty-seven pre-professional years.

Almost eighty years is a long period to cover within the span of this book. I have chosen breadth over depth: the presentation is eclectic and rather achronological and much of its content is concise, while staying focused on the subjects of the respective chapters, leaving room for remarks and observations. Having said that, the spectrum is still too wide. There are many more people whom I did not have a chance to talk to and a wealth of further information I would have liked to include.

Coda

It's an honour to be the writer of this book. At the same time, I am grateful that this has indubitably been a group project. I have assumed the role of an arranger, compiling tunes by music connoisseurs into an orchestral suite for your appreciation. Enjoy!

Jimmy Shiu
1 March 2025

1 *Evolution of the Outfit*

The Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra – HK Phil – is not a disciplinary force and does not mandate a uniform. However, players (especially men) often adhere to a similar set of attire when appearing on stage. What players wear has evolved, reflecting changes in aesthetics, in the availability of resources, in the nature of the concerts, and in social customs. Look at Photo 1.1. Gentlemen are mostly in white shirts and long white trousers, and the lady is in a long black dress (if white is white and black is black – my assumption on looking at a black-and-white photograph).



Photo 1.1: One of SBO's earliest pictures, taken at the orchestra's first concert in 1948. The conductor was Solomon Bard.



Photo 1.2: SBO conducted by Alastair Blair-Kerr along with solo pianist Caroline Braga performing at St. Stephen's Girls' College in 1952.

In a Western orchestra, there are usually more variations in what ladies wear. The current dress code for HK Phil's female players is 'all-black, long dress or trousers, and tops with sleeves'. What male players wear is more undeviating. During the Sino-British era, however, it could be quite flexible. Take Photo 1.2 (from 1952) as an example. Everyone was dressed up for the occasion. There were, however, black bow ties, long ties, black socks, white socks, blazers in black, white, and other colours, no blazers . . . all appearing at the same time.

The Humphrey Bogart Look

In the following years, female players continued to sport long black dresses. At times, it was a combination of black and white; there was also a picture with a lady in *cheongsam*, which reflected the 'Sino' in the Sino-British Orchestra (the SBO – which later became HK Phil). As for gentlemen, sometimes it was a black suit. White blazers and black trousers were once customary, too. Incidentally, this was the dress code of the New York Philharmonic's visit to Hong Kong in July 2023, with ladies in white tops and black trousers. This classic look reminds me

of Humphrey Bogart in the movie *Casablanca*, and this is a common outfit for jazz bands. Resident Conductor Lio Kuokman told me that it was the standard appearance of an American orchestra when performing outdoors. Unsurprising, as that's exactly what he wore at the 2023 Swire Symphony Under the Stars, where he directed the orchestra and played in George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Photo 1.3: Lio Kuokman at the 2023 Swire Symphony Under the Stars concert.



Photo 1.4: HK Phil and its first Music Director Lim Kek-tjiang.

White Tie

As the white blazer fell out of use, black suits (or tuxedos) with black bow-ties became the standard for male players. In Photo 1.4, taken around the time the orchestra turned professional in 1974, one can see Music Director and Principal Conductor Lim Kek-tjiang in a long tailcoat (usually with a white bow tie: the ‘white tie’ outfit), while other players remained in ‘black tie’.

In 1983, the orchestra had the honour of being invited to play at the Osaka International Music Festival. HK Phil’s name was listed along with distinguished groups such as the National Symphony Orchestra from Washington DC, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, the NHK Symphony Orchestra from Japan, and the Royal Ballet from the UK.



| Photo 1.5: HK Phil appearing at the Osaka International Music Festival, 1983.

Epilogue: Back Where We Began



Photo 51.1: SBO in 1948.

This postlude reminds me of our first chord!

Take another look at this photo, which was taken at the SBO's first concert at St. Stephen's Girls' School. The date was 30 April 1948. It was more than an orchestral concert, with piano solo (Beethoven's 'Appassionata' Sonata), some solo singing (with piano accompaniment), Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* Overture, and Haydn's Symphony no. 4 in D major, 'The Clock'.

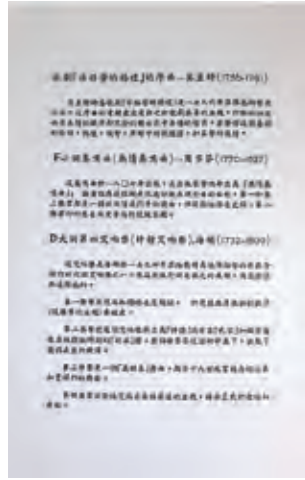
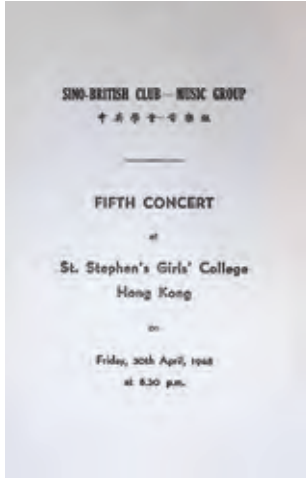


Photo 51.2, Photo 51.3, and Photo 51.4: House programme for SBO's first concert.

If the same programme were presented today, the 'Clock' Symphony would have been no. 101. This was merely a matter of editions. An observant music-lover may discover something else more peculiar.

First, the orchestra was missing an essential instrument, the double bass. Second, why was a tuba called for? The two orchestral works belong to the classical period of the eighteenth century. The instrument was not even invented then.

Now, look closely at the players' list. (Does the name of a second violinist – Domingos Lam – look familiar? Yes, Maestro Doming Lam, the iconic Hong Kong composer, was a founding member of the orchestra.) You may realise there was only one bassoonist, one oboist, but three flautists. Here is my guess: the other bassoon part may have been played on the trombone, and one of the flautists may have taken the second oboe part.

Something inspiring may be revealed when juxtaposing the 'then' and 'now'.

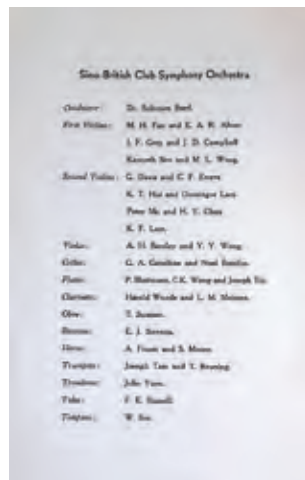


Photo 51.5: The orchestra member list for SBO's first concert.

Table 51.1: A comparison of the SBO and HK Phil today

Then	Now
<p>In a newspaper advertisement posted in October 1947, the amateur SBO appealed to musicians who knew how to play an orchestral instrument to attend their rehearsal on the 22nd at St. Joseph's College. Those interested were reminded to bring along their own music stands as the orchestra did not have such provision.</p>	<p>Since becoming professional in 1974, HK Phil has required players to go through competitive auditions. Today, rehearsals take place at the Cultural Centre Concert Hall, where there are plenty of music stands. More than that, one can just push it down, or pull it up to adjust the height. A light and a rack (for placing a bow or pen) can easily be attached onto the stand; and conductor stands are also provided.</p>
<p>Before the first concert, SBO spent 'a few' months to prepare for 'half' of a programme.</p>	<p>Today, HK Phil may present 'a few' programmes within 'half' a month.</p>
<p>For a year from April 1948, SBO gave about four concerts.</p>	<p>HK Phil usually has a forty-four-week season, giving more than 150 concerts.</p>
<p>There are thirty-one names on the players' list. However, about thirty-five musicians appeared on stage. Four may have joined the band at short notice.</p>	<p>HK Phil currently has ninety-six full-time players. Freelance players are sometimes called in. In the case of Richard Strauss's <i>An Alpine Symphony</i>, there were 110 players on stage, and another eight musicians who played the horn from backstage.</p>

Source: Author.

Before World War II, Hong Kong saw scattered instances of orchestral playing (find out more in 香港音樂的前世今生 [‘Music in a Bygone Era: Music Development in Hong Kong 1930s–1950s’] – a book in Chinese written by Dr Oliver Chou), but the post-war development of orchestral music pioneered by SBO and succeeded by the HK Phil was phenomenal. That premiere performance in 1948 very much started from scratch. The orchestra’s ‘founding fathers’ truly had great vision, intelligence and perseverance.

Looking at what we have today, I am reminded of an old Chinese saying, ‘One generation plants the tree, another gets the shade.’ Behind this seventy-eight-year philharmonic (which, loosely, means ‘the love of music’) history, there is a multitude of music-loving contributors through the ages: composers, lyricists and arrangers who have left us a rich repertoire; players, soloists and conductors who transform written notes into beautiful music for listeners’ pleasure; and people such as music critics, media works, arts administrators, stage professionals, donors and teachers who foster a favourable environment for orchestral music to blossom.

Some of these seasoned music-lovers became my interviewees. More than that, I continued to trouble them for fact-checking, verification, and supplementary information. They have all been generous and helpful to this tiresome writer. I found one thing in common among them: their passion for music. All my interview requests got a green light. While talking about music and the orchestra, all interviewees were enthusiastic. Even with time flying by, there were always more captivating stories to tell. I am deeply touched by their trust in me, their friendship, and their everlasting love of music.

I am also grateful to those who have left us a wealth of written words, pictures, and audio-visual records. Going through such materials was a mesmerising experience. Special credit must be given to one of my main sources of reference: 愛與音樂同行——香港管弦樂團30年 (‘Music with Love – 30th Anniversary of Hong Kong Philharmonic

Orchestra'), a book in Chinese written by the late Mr Chow Fan-fu. Although he has passed away in 2021, this anthology of his continues to live on.

At this point, let me pay tribute to the late Mrs Regina Simon, who inspired her son Andrew to sponsor this publication. As I have mentioned in the chapter 'Moments of Sentiment', this book would not have come to fruition without the bond between them. I am indebted to her and Andy for demonstrating to me that love never dies.

My thanks also go especially to two veteran runners of the orchestra for taking their time to grace this publication with two high-powered messages. I vividly felt their commitment to the orchestra during our meetings. When such commitment is translated into text, it makes for a fulfilling read.

Please bear with me if I am not able to name each colleague of mine who has given me valuable advice on the presentation of my research materials. I am thankful to staff members at the orchestra's office, editors, editorial assistants, and the dedicated team at Hong Kong University Press. The book would not have come to life without their fruitful contributions.

Finally, let me quote that old Chinese saying again – 'One generation plants the tree, another gets the shade'. We count our blessings to be in the shade. As audience members, we are planters too. Our applause and appreciation are essential nutrients for the orchestra to further develop. May Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra continue to shine in years to come, as we continue on this magical philharmonic journey.

Jimmy Shiu
1 March 2025

Appendix

A Look Back at the HK Phil

In January 1979 I knew nothing about a professional symphony orchestra in Hong Kong. I had just completed eight happy years with the excellent Scottish Opera following a short period with the BBC in London and a First-Class Honours degree in Music. I was beginning to think I ought to consider working overseas when I learned the Hong Kong Philharmonic was about to hold interviews for the post of general manager. Making a few phone calls to friends who knew Hong Kong, I was informed I would love working there but that the orchestra might be a ‘challenge’ – the implication being it was an orchestra with problems and that managing it might not be plain sailing. Nevertheless, I applied.

Five weeks later on 3 March I was landing at Kai Tak airport ready to face that challenge.

For my first month, I was put up in the old Lee Gardens Hotel in Causeway Bay, long since demolished. But its location was perfect since it was only a five-minute walk down Percival Street to Harbour View Commercial Building (now also demolished) where the Philharmonic had its offices on the twentieth floor. Instantly I fell in love with my own office. From my desk, I had a view of The Peak round through Central and the soon-to-be skyscraper-dotted Admiralty and Wan Chai, across to Kowloon and, if I stretched a little, to the airport. Down in front of me across Gloucester Road was the Yacht Club and the harbour. I could not have been more happy.

Once I had heard the orchestra and attended a few concerts, I was aware there were more than a few problems to solve. Not that anyone

could really be blamed for these. Starting up any professional ensemble, especially an orchestra – and even more so one with musicians not only from Hong Kong but also a large contingent making up most of the wind and brass sections from the United States – would never be easy anywhere in the world. This is particularly true when, as with the Philharmonic, many of the musicians were almost instantly changing status from amateur to professional.

One problem I found was that advance planning had ground almost to a halt. Few conductors and guest soloists had been booked for the 1979/80 season due to start in September. With most orchestras planning at least two years in advance, this made it vital that I contact the major artists' management companies in London and New York urgently. With the exception of the first professional season when an attempt had been made to sell concerts on a subscription basis, all concerts were individually marketed. This is hugely time-consuming and expensive. I was therefore determined that a new subscription scheme had to be launched. This necessitated getting artists and programmes finalised in just a matter of weeks.

My second motive for starting a subscription was a burning desire to change the balance of the audience. Most of the regular audience seemed to be expatriates. This was perhaps understandable, given that most Hong Kong residents were immigrants from China with little time for entertainment other than television and movies. But Hong Kong was quickly transforming to a global financial and trade centre. Hong Kong Chinese had already started taking over some of the old traditional Hong Kong businesses in addition to starting their own. Wealth was trickling down. I was certain many families would want to emulate others worldwide by finding out more about music and being encouraged to attend concerts.

Initially the Philharmonic's General Committee had reservations about subscription. It became clear that some members were concerned we might be creating an expat club. But my argument won the

day when I agreed we would cap the number of subscriptions at just over 50% of available seats. When we achieved more than 30% subscribers, we were all elated.

Total attendees per concert, though, were always limited by the 1,450-seat capacity of the City Hall Concert Hall. That changed in December when we were invited by the Hong Kong Jockey Club to give an afternoon concert to inaugurate the infield park at the new Shatin racetrack. Here was an opportunity I craved: the chance to perform to a much larger audience. In addition to short classical works, we invited the popular Hong Kong Canto-pop singer Roman Tam to sing with us. On a beautiful December afternoon, we presented the concert to 10,000 listeners, most of whom would never have heard a symphony orchestra before.

The second half of that subscription season taking us to July 1980 was even more successful than the first. The musicians were also enjoying playing under some more experienced conductors, especially in the final three weeks of the season with the American Kenneth Schermerhorn. Ken had just resigned after a long tenure as Music Director of the Milwaukee Symphony. After one concert that orchestra had presented in New York's finest concert hall, Carnegie Hall, the influential critic of *The New Yorker* magazine, Andrew Porter, wrote, 'A superb conductor. I should place him, without further thought or qualification, among the finest conductors of any nationality now before the American public.' Little surprise, perhaps, that Ken would return to Hong Kong on a regular basis, by 1984 as music director.

The Philharmonic by 1980 was still relatively small for a symphony orchestra, having only around sixty-five musicians. I had informed the General Committee that somehow we had to find the funds to increase the size to nearer eighty-four so that the larger symphonic works could be more regularly performed. I was therefore asked to prepare a five-year plan to outline how I saw the orchestra being developed. Apart from numbers, I stressed the need for formal auditions leading to

tenure, better-quality conductors and soloists engaged more regularly, the development of a more comprehensive educational programme that children attending would actually enjoy rather than merely endure, and – again – doing everything possible to change the balance of the audience.

There were several other key parts to my plan. One was the need to make the Hong Kong Philharmonic much better known outside Hong Kong. Only by doing so could we attract even better musicians and the most international of soloists. This was doubly important because the Hong Kong government had decided to spend a very large sum on building an academy for performing arts in Wan Chai, a gift from the Hong Kong Jockey Club to celebrate its hundredth anniversary. As with major orchestras everywhere, the Philharmonic's best musicians would be needed to help train the next generation of Hong Kong instrumentalists.

Very quickly fate played into my hands. Having lunch with some of London's finest orchestral musicians in the summer of 1980, Carl Pini the hugely experienced and much-admired concertmaster of London's Philharmonia Orchestra said he had heard about Hong Kong and might be interested in coming to spend a few years. Another of his colleagues from that orchestra's string section, Ben(edict) Cruft, expressed a similar view. To cut a long story short, funds were quickly found in Hong Kong to engage both musicians. It was an enormous coup that made headlines in musical journals around the world.

Carl (known to all as Tony) made an immediate impact at his first pair of concerts. The piano soloist Ilana Vered was playing the Mozart C major concerto K. 467. All had gone well at the Friday evening concert. By the Saturday afternoon Ms Vered was unwell and unable to perform. How to salvage the concert? It was much too late to fly anyone in. But Tony said he had just performed one of the Mozart violin concertos in London. If the library had the parts and the conductor felt he could lead the orchestra without rehearsal, he would be happy to perform it.

We changed the order of the concert to put the symphony in the first half. This gave the conductor, Tony, and the principals time during the intermission to quickly discuss issues like tempi and phrasing. For an orchestra which had played very little Mozart and a soloist who did not know the orchestra it was a complete triumph. The audience gave everyone a standing ovation at the end.

The following summer I was in London finding conductors and soloists for the 1982/83 and 1983/84 seasons when fate again played into our hands. We still had to find a soloist and conductor for an important Arts Festival concert in February – only eight months away. At my first meeting I was discussing this with the impresario Lilian Hochhauser when a glint appeared in her eye.

‘I know exactly what you want.’

I was not aware till then that she was helping Maxim Shostakovich and his pianist son Dmitri become established in the West. The son and grandson of the great Soviet composer, they had defected only eight weeks earlier.

‘Why don’t you engage Maxim to conduct, Dmitri to play the Second Piano Concerto and have a Shostakovich Symphony in the second half? You will then be the only orchestra outside the Soviet Union to have three Shostakovichs on the same stage at the same time.’ She laughed! I looked to the heavens with thanks! The concert was a very big success. As a result, Maxim accepted our invitation to become principal guest conductor for three seasons. Our international profile was growing steadily.

Within Asia, I had already been making regular trips to meet agents and promoters in Japan. Soon after our Shostakovich concert, I received an invitation for the Philharmonic to take part in the 1983 Osaka International Festival, then the most important music festival in Asia. Given that we would be performing in the same festival as the Washington National Symphony Orchestra under Rostropovich and the Vienna Philharmonic under Maazel, it was vitally important that the

A Concert of Life

In 1974, the HK Phil became a professional orchestra. The plan for professionalisation was initiated during the inaugural Hong Kong Arts Festival in 1973. At the time, the Hong Kong Governor Sir Murray MacLehose described the process as one in which the orchestra was conceived and established in under a year, bringing dozens of concerts annually to Hong Kong – something that ‘Hong Kong can be proud of.’

In 1974, I too began my professional journey, starting a position in the accounting department of a large company after graduation. By chance, I saw a recruitment advertisement for the ‘Hong Kong Philharmonic Society’. At the time, I didn’t even know what ‘Philharmonic’ meant. A quick dictionary lookup revealed it to mean ‘deep love of music’. What it didn’t explain, however, was that the Philharmonic Society was the organisation managing the orchestra. Having loved music since childhood – singing in school choirs and using part-time tutoring income to pay for piano lessons – I was eager to apply for a music-related job. The position also offered a generous four-figure monthly salary, which was highly attractive to someone just entering the workforce.

The recruitment process was no simple matter. It began with a written test held in a room at City Hall, attended by at least forty people. I was fortunate enough to make it to the interview stage. Facing me were Darwin Chen, the manager of City Hall, and a tall, commanding expatriate who I later learned was the renowned Maestro Hans Günter Mommer (HK Phil’s principal conductor and musical director from 1975). I sensed they were looking for someone who loved music, and I was lucky to be selected to join the orchestra.

On my first day of work in 1975, I followed the address on my offer letter to the ‘Second Floor, Low Block, City Hall’. However, even before stepping into the office, I encountered my first challenge! The second floor housed the balcony seating of the concert hall, adjacent to a Chinese restaurant. Where exactly was my office? It turned out

that the newly established HK Phil had repurposed a dressing room in the concert hall as its office. To reach it, you had to pass through an unassuming door leading to a long corridor that also connected to the restaurant kitchen. The office was at the end of the corridor. At the time, the organisation consisted of only five staff members: General Manager So Hau-leung, Secretary Ho Siu-chi, Concert Assistant James Kwok, Office Assistant Ambrose Law, and me.

Before my arrival, accounting tasks were handled by Peter Chan Po Fun & Co. My first assignment was to take over their responsibilities. I'm deeply grateful to accountant Peter Chan for patiently teaching me and helping me establish the orchestra's first set of accounting ledgers. But my duties extended beyond numbers; they also involved numbers of words. In the 1970s, telegrams were still widely used and their cost-per-word structure demanded creative brevity. I frequently drafted telegrams for urgent communication with artists overseas, sending or decoding them at the Cable & Wireless Office, conveniently located opposite City Hall.

While the concert assistant primarily managed scores and assisted backstage during rehearsals and performances, the rest of us handled everything else: booking venues, scheduling artists, arranging flights and hotels, greeting artists at the airport, organising ticketing, handling banking matters and personnel issues in the orchestra. Despite the hectic workload, I thoroughly enjoyed the close-knit working environment. The location of our office within City Hall made it easy for musicians to drop by during rehearsal breaks. I saw every orchestra member at least once a month because back then, pay cheques were handed out in person, leading to more face-to-face interactions and a familial atmosphere.

As the orchestra grew, we moved from City Hall to a proper office in Causeway Bay. By 1982, our team had expanded to nine people under General Manager John Duffus. That year marked a turning point, as vice chairman of Urban Council, Hugh Moss Gerald Forsgate,

approved a proposal to align HK Phil salaries with the government's master pay scale. This also led to an administrative restructuring. I was promoted to accounting and administration manager, alongside two other managers – orchestra personnel manager Lee Bo Luen and marketing and promotions manager Ethel Lau – marking the beginning of a departmental system. By 1983, I was further promoted to assistant general manager, along with Lee Bo Luen. Tseng Sun-man joined as development and marketing manager and was quickly promoted as well.

Under John Duffus's leadership, the orchestra flourished, achieving many milestones: reintroducing subscription ticket plans, establishing the Friends of the Philharmonic membership club to strengthen audience relationships, conducting its first China tour, forming the HK Phil Chorus, and creating the resident conductor position to facilitate regular school concerts. The entire administrative team functioned like sponges, constantly absorbing new knowledge and skills. Many who worked at HK Phil went on to shine in Hong Kong's cultural sector.

In 1989, HK Phil moved into the Cultural Centre – a momentous occasion. The author of this book, Jimmy Shiu, joined as audience development manager in late 1988, and we witnessed this pivotal moment together. I have particularly vivid memories of this year because I was pregnant at the time, yet I frequently had to rush around managing the progress of the office renovations. Despite the challenges, the joy of reuniting with the musicians in one location made it worthwhile. The new office was next to the concert hall, making operations much smoother. David Atherton, who had just become music director, even had his own office to facilitate artistic decision-making. An innovator, he also introduced Apple computers to our office, helping us set up in the new office. We gave him the nickname 'David Appleton'.

By 1994, as HK Phil celebrated its twentieth anniversary, I decided it was time to focus on family after nearly two decades of service. I thought this marked the end of my journey with the orchestra. However,

HK Phil 50+

A Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra Project

Author: Jimmy Shiu

Consultant: Vennie Ho

Cover design adapted from the Chinese edition, originally designed by Kaman Cheng

Photos: Unless otherwise specified, photos are provided by HK Phil, HK Phil Archive, and photographers Desmond Chan, Olivia Chau, Cheung Chi Wai, Cheung Wai Lok, Keith Hiro, Eric Hong, Issac Wong, and Ka Lam.

Published by:
Hong Kong University Press
The University of Hong Kong
Pok Fu Lam Road
Hong Kong

<https://hkupress.hku.hk>

Printed by: Hang Tai Printing Company Ltd.

First Edition. December 2025.

Price: HK\$198

ISBN: 978-988-8900-94-7

© 2025 Hong Kong Philharmonic Society Limited. All rights reserved.
Unauthorised reproduction is prohibited.

The Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra is financially supported by the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

Principal Patron: Swire

In the 1970s, as Hong Kong's economy began to soar, the public started to place greater emphasis on cultural and artistic pursuits. The Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra (HK Phil) became a professional ensemble in 1974, providing high-quality musical entertainment for the public while also promoting classical music and nurturing the next generation of young musicians.

Upon obtaining his master's degree in the late 1980s, author Jimmy Shiu joined the orchestra as audience development manager from 1988 to 1994, working alongside the ensemble to cultivate Hong Kong's musical landscape. On the orchestra's golden jubilee, Shiu offers a warm narrative that reflects on 50 significant moments both on and off stage.

The HK Phil is celebrated as one of Asia's premier classical orchestras. During its 44-week season, the orchestra performs over 150 concerts in the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, and other international cities, reaching more than 200,000 audience members. In 2019, the HK Phil became the first Asian winner of the 'Orchestra of the Year' award by the renowned British magazine *Gramophone*. While its history dates to the establishment of the Sino-British Orchestra in 1947, the HK Phil was officially registered in 1957 and became a professional orchestra in 1974. The 2023/24 season marked its 50th professional season.

Jimmy Shiu majored in composition at Hong Kong Baptist College, and in voice and composition at the University of Sheffield before pursuing a career in arts administration.


香港大學出版社
HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS



<https://hkupress.hku.hk>

Classical Music

ISBN 978-988-8900-94-7



9 789888 900947

Printed and bound in Hong Kong, China

