

Making a Scene: A Capella

Hossan Leong: Welcome to a very special episode of *Making A Scene*, an Esplanade podcast about how art gets made. This is our first narrative episode, and it's all about a *capella*. You'll be hearing some key members of Singapore's a *capella* community talk about how this scene started, how it evolved, and what the future holds.

I'm Hossan Leong, your host for this episode. You may know that I often sing in my shows, but you may not know that one of the first places where I started getting involved in music was my church, where I conducted the choir and helped to put musicals together. The church is actually a big part of a *capella* music's origin story. A *capella* is an Italian phrase that means "in the style of the chapel", and that is because this style of singing without any accompanying musical instruments began in chapels.

Since then, a *capella music* has branched out from these roots, and it now includes many non-religious styles of music. But what has not changed is that it is still music that centres the human voice.

[Excerpt of Budak Pantai's Ah Bu Den]

Cherie Chai: Music that comes from the human voice, when it comes together, with really good blend and synergy, there's this magic that happens and there's a sparkle. And I think the human voice is one of those instruments that can really communicate emotions much more than other instruments.

Hossan Leong: That's Cherie Chai, the music director of a *capella* group 1023. Like many members of the a *capella* community in Singapore, Cherie was a choir member before she got interested in a *capella*. Today, she is also a choral conductor for schools, so Cherie is the perfect person to kick off a brief explanation of the key differences between choral music and a *capella* music.

Cherie Chai: In a choir, we have a lot of people with us, so there's a different kind of energy when you're singing. And when the voices come together to blend, the voices contribute to an overall sound. But if we go by a *capella* where we try and go with one voice per voice part, it's almost a solo kind of performance. So you have to be quite steady with your own voice, and at the same time have enough knowledge and dexterity to be able to adapt to your teammates, to blend, and to work with different voices.

Hossan Leong: In a *capella groups*, performers also have to adopt a different mindset. Here's Angelina Choo, the founder and current director of The A Capella Society, with her take on this.

Angelina Choo: There's nobody waving their hands anymore to tell you when to start and stop, how to go up to go to, you know, crescendo, decrescendo or whatever. It is a community effort. Like in a group, everybody makes decisions together. And you have to work together, and that takes commitment and quite a different skill set.

Hossan Leong: Another distinctive feature of contemporary a *capella* is that it often includes the imitation of musical instruments. Most famously, each group typically has a vocal percussionist.

Cherie Chai: Vocal percussionist basically is the drummer of an a *capella* group. So if you think of an a *capella* group, essentially as a band, like a standard music band, then the vocal percussionist is really

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the rhythmic backbone of the group. One of the most basic things that a vocal percussionist needs to do is to be able to keep a very steady tempo, because the group is relying on you for that tempo, and to be able to keep all the other members in the group in the same speed of singing. You know, when we are on stage, sometimes nerves will mean that we might want to go a little bit faster or go a little bit slower. So it's your job to make sure that everybody is together, the entire group is tight.

So our standard vocal percussion drum kit, you will have your kick drum "b-, b-, b-", hi-hat "ts-,ts-", snare drums "phf-, phf-". And a standard pattern that you have we have in four-four kind of groove "b-, ts-, phf-f, ts-, b-b-ts-ts-, phf-, ts-, b-b-, ts-, phf-, ts-, b-b-phf-b-phf-phf-b-b-b-tss-", something like that.

Hossan Leong: Besides the drums, there are all kinds of musical instruments that a human voice can mimic very convincingly. It's all a matter of experimentation and practice, practice, practice.

Cherie Chai: Every voice has a specific sound to it, and sometimes that lends itself better towards a specific instrument. For example, my singing voice is fairly bright, and I can't sing very low. So, what we discovered is that my voice lends itself quite well to the Chinese instrument *erhu*. *Erhu*, essentially, we use the word itself, *er*, and if you pronounce it with a curled tongue, or *juanshe*, that lends itself well to creating that tone. So it's about adjusting a little bit, the harmonics in your mouth, the shape, as well as the structures in your face, as well as your throat, just to create that timbre.

So when I first started out, it was a very shy *erhu*, I went "er-er-er". And then along the way, I have a friend who plays the *erhu*, so I was like, hi can you record how you would bow the instrument, so that I can follow the phrasing and, and have a better representation of the instrument. So then she mentioned that on a heavy bow, there's a stronger "a" sound to it. So instead of going, "er-", then I had to put in a little bit more of a glottal start to it, "a'er-, a'er--".

Hossan Leong: Unlike choirs, a *capella* music often needs electronic amplification, which means singing into microphones. So for an a *capella* performance to truly shine, singers have to be very attuned to the ways technology can enhance their sound.

Angelina Choo: Knowing your technology means the members of the group should basically know how to use the microphone. So, microphone technique, distance, popping, that sort of thing. They should have enough interest to find out what kind of microphones work for their voices, what kinds don't. Let's say we have a five-member group, the sixth member is your sound engineer.

To take an example is like, if you watch Tuck & Patti, this jazz duo, do their sound-check, they know decibel by decibel, they can tell the engineer exactly what they need and what the engineer should be doing in that hall for them, as they test their equipment and their voices. And I guess a *capella* singers should also gradually aim for that kind of knowledge, that kind of sensitivity into hearing in your ears to know exactly what they're doing. They're not just singing. There's also lots of magic happening on the board.

Hossan Leong: And finally, a *capella* groups don't usually perform the music genres that choral groups do. In Singapore in the 1980s and 90s, that meant no classical and no folk. Instead, a *capella* was all

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about pop, and pop was fun. Ho Kah Keh was a choral performer before he joined a *capella* group Budak Pantai in the 1990s. And he remembers how small vocal groups became cool.

Ho Kah Keh: At that time, choirs in schools were extremely unpopular, nobody wanted to be in the choir. I mean, I was in the JC choir which they were like 60 Girls and 10 guys, kind of thing. And especially for the guys, it was kind of not hip to be in a choir you know what I mean?

And then I think the 80s or early 90s, the *a capella* scene was pretty raw. There were not many groups around. When the boy band thing started taking off, like Boyz II Men, Boyzone and all these, it suddenly became hip to be in a vocal group, and then at that point you started seeing groups sprouting. And most of them, I think, come from choirs, because that's where the original experience was and then hey, we can do parts, let's get together four of us, six of us, or however many. And let's just go and do something, you know.

Hossan Leong: That's pretty much how In-A-Chord, one of Singapore's earliest *a capella* groups started. Its members were in choirs during their junior college days, and their love for singing persisted when they started their National Service.

Jason Ong: When we first stepped into NS, we were like, lamenting, how, die lah, itching to sing and then, you know, there's no opportunity to sing, you know. So the only choir that we have actually heard of was SYC, we knew that none of us wanted to join SYC at that point in time. So we say, okay, because we didn't want to sing the classical genre of music anymore. We wanted to do pop, we wanted to do you know, something fun. So we said, well, maybe let's look for friends and see if we can start our own thing.

Hossan Leong: That's Jason Ong, one of In-A-Chord's founding members. And the SYC he's talking about is the Singapore Youth Choir. In-A-Chord started by recording some demos, trying to get gigs and looking for more people to join their ranks. Vaughan Tan is the bass singer of In-A-Chord, as you can probably tell from his deep voice, and he remembers how their recruitment drive involved keeping their ears open when they were singing marching songs during National Service.

Vaughan Tan: So what happened was, Cecil was marching in his unit, you know, we were all in NS, right? So he heard this guy next to him who could really sing. You know when we marched and you know, sometimes we will sing like, you know, those army songs. And then he heard this guy and, eh eh, this guy can sing. So this guy turned out to be Kim Beng.

Hossan Leong: Somehow or other, it all worked out, and In-A-Chord was born. It was the late 1980s, and none of the group's members knew how to arrange songs, so they improvised.

Jason Ong: We didn't have any scores to speak of. Nobody had scores, it's not like you could go to the Internet to download. Sorry, library also don't have, no such thing as scores one, so that time Esplanade not built yet, MRT haven't even come out. So everything also don't have, jialat, so okay lor, what to do? DIY, so okay, Dom, you take one, Brandon you take one song, then I take one song, then we thrash. So anybody who knows a little bit about music, just whack, just put a score together.

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I think the one thing all of us had in common was that I think almost all of us, we all liked jazz. We all loved Take 6. We all loved First Call and the Christmas album, right? These were the very, very few sources of a *capella* music we had as a reference.

Hossan Leong: Some of the earliest performances took place at the National University of Singapore, where Kah Keh was working at the time.

Ho Kah Keh: I was working at the precursor to the Cultural Centre in NUS, which was called then The Centre for Musical Activities. And I was in charge of all these student activities and all that, right. And then one day, this guy comes and knocks on my door in the office, and he said, I have a group that would like to perform. And of course, at that time, I was like, gee, I thought I knew every choir in town, how can I never, I don't know this thing here, you see. And I said, okay, I got to listen to you all to be sure.

So we arranged one afternoon, and I think there was more than 10 of them at that time. So they came in, we shut the door in the studio, and then they sang. And I fell off my chair. I really fell off my chair because like, oh my, I was like, blown away. Totally blown away. I thought I knew the *a capella* scene. Under the radar, there's all these other things brewing, you know. So that was what surprised me. Oh, my God, the jazz harmonies, the blending, the sheer number of them, the way they swung, the way they got it together, everything was tight.

Hossan Leong: Here's an example of In-A-Chord's beautiful jazz harmonies, as presented in their song *Ice Kacang*.

[Excerpt of Budak Pantai's Ah Bu Den]

Vaughan Tan: Nobody knew that pop songs could be sung *a capella*. So the style of music that we were doing was like really refreshing for all the people at the university, so they really loved us. Every faculty they have their own annual dinner and dance which they call ball. So we were invited to almost every single one.

Hossan Leong: They also won the NUS Talentime competition, which turned out to be a major milestone.

Jason Ong: The Talentime kind of opened a lot of doors for us, not only within the university itself, but because the judges were Dick Lee and Jacintha, and you know, they had a lot of contacts, so they kind of like, mentioned us to some of their friends and people started to call us. And one thing led to another, and we got introduced to other people in the music industry, and we were really fortunate.

Hossan Leong: In 1993, they took part in a Beatles sound-alike competition organized by the TV variety show Rollin' Good Times. By then, In-A-Chord was already considered an established group.

Jason Ong: I remember that our winning song was *Eight Days a Week*. And as I was arranging, I kind of went a bit kee siao lah, gila a bit. So I started throwing in a lot of other Beatles reference, Beatles songs, with words, into the song itself, you know, so that has kind of become a style that I use every so

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often, to insert little quotations here and there. So, if you if you are a fan of The Beatles, then there will be about 20 other Beatles songs within *Eight Days a Week* that we would have sung, you would have picked it up.

Hossan Leong: Kah Keh had also taken part in this Beatles competition, as part of a brand new a *capella* group.

Ho Kah Keh: The funny thing was, the moment we saw In-A-Chord walk through the door, we went, die. Here was a group that was, been there for so long, and here we were, like barely a few weeks old, and we want to compete with a group that's been together for so many years. No way. And true enough, you know, it was like, we were like swept under the carpet.

Hossan Leong: He brushed off the loss and tried out for Rollin' Good Times again, a few months later, with a different group. This time, it was a Beach Boys sound-alike contest, and that inspired this group to name themselves Budak Pantai, which is how you say Beach Boys in Malay. In its early years, Budak Pantai performed regularly at a small venue on the roof of the YMCA. This was an initiative for youths that was started by one of the group's members, Danny Lai.

Ho Kah Keh: So I remember sitting up in the rooftop and have two tables, eight people watching us. Yeah, so we started like that.

Hossan Leong: Slowly, their fan base started to grow. A large part of their appeal was the famous Budak Pantai comedic style of performing.

Ho Kah Keh: There wasn't a conscious strategy, or sit down and let's do this, let's do that. We're just having fun with each other in the practice. I mean, like throwing things at each other, do this, do that. And we actually translated that to the stage. And I think that spontaneity is something that is quite rare, if I'm not mistaken, because I think a lot of groups tend to be a bit tight on stage. But I think for us, we leave a lot of things open. And I think that's one of the factors where, if I could call that an evolution of our style, was that how we just allow that to be comfortable with us and how we just allow that to evolve and take its own, take its own life.

The other thing which Budak does, which I don't think any other vocal group does is that we don't have scores. I think that's one of the exciting things about it. Because there's no score, we each take a responsibility for our own part. And I think half the time, it's like, okay, we got this figured out, you go find your part. I think the other thing that we do, I don't think that's very common is that we workshop the songs together. It's not like having one person write the arrangements, and there you go, sing it. We would actually put a stake, each of us would put a stake in the song. It's extremely organic. The organic was exciting, the organic was interesting, the organic was just like a new world.

Hossan Leong: Another Budak Pantai signature was the liberal use of Singlish, which was thanks to member Joseph Wong.

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Ho Kah Keh: A lot of the local content songs come from Joe, he has this knack for writing these lyrics that are like, you know, that would take a local, a very colloquial statement and actually make a whole song out of it. *Ah Bu Den* is completely Joe, Joe wrote the whole thing.

Hossan Leong: Here's what *Ah Bu Den* sounds like, in all its Singlish glory.

[Song excerpt]

Ho Kah Keh: Our arrangements technically are pretty simple. To be honest, I feel they're actually quite simple. They're not like these very sophisticated jazz harmonies you find in some of those like Manhattan Transfer, New York Voices, you know, that kind of stuff, but people enjoy it. So, you know. And I think our appeal has always been, we spoke to the people, we spoke to the audience.

Hossan Leong: That audience expanded steadily in the 1990s, as the *a capella* scene blossomed. In 1996, In-A-Chord was signed by Taiwanese recording label, Forward Music.

Vaughan Tan: By the time we got signed, it was down to six people. So these six are the ones who say, okay, we are just going to continue despite having a full time job. We're just going to, you know, keep doing this and probably see how it goes. The Taiwanese label, they were not convinced that a fully *a capella* album could sell. So, so we actually had to sing with instrumentation.

Jason Ong: In fact, they told us that the *a capella* sound is way ahead of the Taiwan music scene. Before we even produced our first album, the producer said, okay, let's test market first. So he got us to sing a few songs, about four tracks, which he then submitted to a filmmaker.

Vaughan Tan: If you were to go and look for soundtrack of Edward Yang's movie *Mahjong*, it has got our voice inside.

Jason Ong: From there, then the producers were kind of like more convinced, okay, yeah, we can move forward with this project. Now we'll give you the money to complete one full album.

Vaughan Tan: So it's a Taiwanese label, signing a Singaporean group singing English songs. We got like, half a track of *a capella* in that first album.

Hossan Leong: The album sold 15,000 copies. That same year In-A-Chord was the featured guest in pop star Sandy Lam's concert at the Singapore Indoor Stadium.

Jason Ong: I've never felt that kind of you know, when you have 10,000 people clapping at once, that wave, that rush, I cannot describe it. You have to be there to witness it for yourself.

Hossan Leong: Around the same time, the AKA A Capella Festival arrived on the scene.

Jason Ong: This chap by the name of Andy Quek, he single-handedly, without any support from anyone else, put together a concert. He came up with his own money and he contacted the groups and

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he did everything, you know, simply because he loves a *capella* music, and he wanted to have a platform to bring all the local a *capella* groups together.

Hossan Leong: In 1997, Andy staged the second edition of the AKA A Capella Festival. Peter Huang was in secondary school then, and experiencing problems with his left leg, which meant he had to use crutches at school and a wheelchair at home. Peter had reluctantly joined the school choir as that was one of the few ECAs he could participate in. Attending the festival was a big turning point for him.

Peter Huang: It was at Victoria Theatre. And that was my first proper introduction to contemporary style a *capella*, with individual microphones for each person. Before going to my first AKA A Capella Festival, I had experienced two years of singing in the school choir, which was just standing there and singing as a large group, and that's how you got the volume across with the numbers, so there was no amplification. Sometimes there was amplification if the venue was particularly large, but definitely no such thing as handheld mics.

So to see an amplified form of a *capella* was very unusual to me, and to see them doing material that was pop, and current, they were doing basically the latest hits of that era, so this was particularly refreshing to me. Because in choir we were doing mostly classical works or folk works, so definitely a huge paradigm shift.

Hossan Leong: Inspired, he formed his own a *capella* group and began arranging songs and learning vocal percussion.

Peter Huang: The initial 12 to 24 months of people attempting to learn vocal percussion sounds like absolute rubbish. And I was no different. I knew that it was a feature that had to be featured. Like it was an element that must be there, in order to differentiate from choral music, number one. Number two, nobody else around me wanted to take it up. Because it was weird, rude, bizarre and embarrassing. You're talking about a school culture that was largely conservative, shy and don't rock the boat, kind of culture, don't stick out kind of culture. To put it bluntly, I was kind of already embarrassed every single day sitting in a wheelchair, so I had nothing to lose.

Hossan Leong: He was also prepared to put more on the line because for Peter, a *capella* had arrived at a tough time in his life, and it felt like a revelation.

Peter Huang: I felt like I had a functioning body. I felt like I could do something physically with my body that was, that was positive, that was capable, that was unique, that was healthy.

Hossan Leong: Energised by the possibilities of the genre, he decided to bring his own take to a *capella* music.

Peter Huang: The scene back then was largely English-speaking, I would say 80-90% of the material was in English. Most of the people who had been in those a *capella* groups had some choral background. And the people that had choral background tend to be more English-speaking, for one reason or another. So it was quite natural that they didn't have much interest or knowledge or affinity for Chinese pop.

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But I had a bit of a different background and I decided to pursue what was natural to me. We were much more high energy, a lot less, quote unquote blendy. We were breaking a lot of mindsets about what a *capella* was.

So I was listening to a lot more American pop *a capella* at the time, so a lot of vocal bands and usage of heavy sound effects. So for example, if you had harmonies people would usually sing “oo” or “ah” or “doo” or “dah”, so something that sounds spoken, something that sounds pronounceable as a human voice, but I was using syllables and sounds like “jen”, “jene”, or “jjj” or “vvv”, so things that don't happen in a way that can be normally spelled out. So you kind of have to make up your own spellings of the sounds.

The vocal percussion sounds at the time were mostly vocal cords-based, so it was spoken. So the kick drum would be like a “duhh-”, the snare drum would be like “ta-”, and then you still have “ts-” and “chh-” and “kshh-”. So those are still around. So a full drum sequence would be like “duhh-, ts-, ta-, duhh-duhh-duhh-, ta-duhh-, duhh-duhh-, ts-ta-, duhh-ta-, ta-ta-duhh-duhh-, chh-ts-ta-”. So it sounded like something you could speak and type out.

I was one of the earlier ones to kind of go into a little bit of the beat-boxing scene in the 90s and get into lip, tongue, teeth, bass sounds that had no involvement with the vocal cords. So a “duhh-” became a “bfh-”, snare drum went from a “ta-” into a “phff-”. So the drum sequence went from “duhh-, ts-, ta-, ts-ta-ts-ts-, duhh-, ta-ta-duhh-, became “phff-, ts-, bfh-, bfh-bfh, bfh-bfh-, bfh-bfh-dun-dun-pshh-”. So that's the fundamental change in sound, and that did surprise a lot of people because nobody else was really doing it at the time.

Hossan Leong: The turn of the millennium also saw Angelina exploring new frontiers.

Angelina Choo: I went up over to the US to watch my first international *a capella* festival, I think was the West Coast A Capella Festival. It was a really, really long show, a couple of hours long. And from that festival, I was so motivated to bring this wonderful group called m-pact to Singapore and when they arrived on our shores that was the first contemporary *a capella* concert ever in Singapore. So that was quite the defining moment. They were so good, just so good. Pop, jazz at a very very, very high level. I think it defined the kind of sound, kind of direction we wanted to go with *a capella*, we wanted to stay away from neo-classical or barbershop to do something different other than, beautiful choral singing, and to experiment, to expand. And I think most of the *a capella* community was in the audience, including new audience as well.

Hossan Leong: In 2002, she founded the A Capella Society, which is now known as Singapore's leading resource centre for *a capella* happenings. One of its signature events is a competition called the A Capella Championships.

Angelina Choo: So let's paint a picture, we started off in a gay bar, Mox Bar, thanks to dear Mok who loaned us his space and we copied the local Singapore Youth Festival and said okay, we're going have a compulsory piece and they sang to death this one song, which we do not ever want to hear again,

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after hearing 20 times in all kinds of convoluted versions. We took that out of course straightaway next year.

I think we started off with groups just trying to sing, and kind of stay in tune, and stay on the beat, and stay, just stay, stick together in a song, and not have it all completely fall apart. And today's younger folk who have got more stimulation from YouTube and all that I think the ability to do a cover song, a great solo on a cover song, is a lot more effortless than it was back then.

It had always been the place if you wanted to know what everybody else in the tertiary and under category were doing, and even some open category, and just get a refresher of like, oh, what's everybody's singing? What do they sound like today? You know, then this is the event that you want to be at.

Hossan Leong: Cherie, for example, has fond memories of attending the A Capella Championships in the mid-2000s.

Cherie Chai: I think one of my favourite, like most distinct memories was going down to try and support one of the groups that was competing. And the whole entire concourse at the Esplanade was just like, jam-packed with people. So that's my first memory of the *a capella* scene and how vibrant it was.

Hossan Leong: Cherie went on to join the NUS Resonance *a capella* group, and continued performing after graduating from university. In 2015, she formed 1023 along with a few other *a capella* performers who had all come together to celebrate Singapore's 50th year of independence.

Cherie Chai: I arranged a medley of Singapore songs from essentially the formation of Singapore, all the way through to the 50th year, encompassing songs from each decade. And then, as we kind of spent a bit more time together with each other, we're like, hey, actually, this is quite fun. And, shall we make this thing permanent? So 1023, the meaning of our name is because in computer geek-speak terms, it takes 1,024 megabytes to form one gigabyte. And a gigabyte is commonly known as a gig. So 1023 basically means we are always looking forward to our next gig. Tada!

Hossan Leong: The group is known for its multicultural repertoire, which was something Cherie says happened quite organically.

Cherie Chai: Most of us had a little bit of a choir background. And coming from that, to us, one of the most important things is authenticity, of pronunciation, of style. We try our very, very best to, to accord the appropriate respect to another culture, as well as another cultures' languages as well.

So along the way, as 1023 was establishing itself, we had the opportunity to perform at several grassroots events. And we thought it will be very nice if we can perform songs that bring together you know, both the older generation, as well as our generation and even children. So one of our favourite things to see is like, you know, maybe a grandparent coming to a 1023 show with their grandchild. And also one of the things as coming from a music education perspective, I think it's important to maintain the knowledge of a lot of Singapore's community songs.

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Hossan Leong: In 2018, their rendition of a medley of Tamil songs, Munnaeru Vaalibaa and Singai Naadu, went viral online. Cherie achieved a creative breakthrough with this medley as she was able to incorporate *konnakkol*, a form of Indian Carnatic vocal percussive music, into the arrangement.

Cherie Chai: I did a little bit of research into the various like Indian percussions and *konnakkol*, that came up. And the more I listened to it, the more I felt that it was something that could support the song. But obviously, there is a pattern to it, and there is a structure to it, and I didn't want to offend any culture, or to make up something that is not legit. So that's when I did a little bit more research to find like a vocal percussion teacher, a *konnakkol* teacher. And that's where I found the World Konnakkol Academy. And my teacher is actually based in Bangalore. So I always joke that even before COVID, and before you know, home based learning and e-learning became a thing. I was already like attending Skype lessons with my teacher just to learn about *konnakkol*.

With *konnakkol*, there's essentially, they don't really talk about like, oh, this is a kick drum, this is a snare drum. We go by syllables, "ta-", "di-", "ghi-", "nam-", "dom-". And it follows eight beat kind of pattern. So one of the patterns, for example that I use in the Tamil medley, it goes from crotchets to quavers to semi-quavers, something like that, so, "ta-, di-, dom-, nam-", that's four. "ta-kita-, di-kita-, dom-kita-, nam-kita-", that one goes into quadruple. And "ta-kita-, di-kita-, dom-kita-, nam-kita-", and it goes faster. Yeah, it's essentially how *konnakkol* works.

Hossan Leong: Here's what the final arrangement sounds like.

[Song excerpt]

Hossan Leong: Cherie continues to draw inspiration from the music of different cultures.

Cherie Chai: Different cultures have different rhythmic patterns that are really interesting. So *konnakkol* is one of them, obviously, for Tamil music, and in Malay music, for example, one of the things that I love reading about and finding out more about is really the interlocking rhythms, and how all the various drums actually, they're actually doing different rhythms. But when you hear it together, you can hear the different nuances and it comes together quite harmoniously.

Hossan Leong: Here's what fellow vocal percussionist Peter has to say about Cherie's distinctive style.

Peter Huang: She also has a lot of jazz sounds and ethnic sounds, which are quite unique to her skill-set. She has a lot more nuance with "phff-fff-fff-f". So air control at the lips, and teeth, and tongue. But mine is a lot more power with the lips. So everybody has their own thing.

Hossan Leong: For a while in the 2000s, it wasn't quite clear to Peter, what his own thing was, professionally speaking. He attended the Berkeley College of Music in the United States for a year and then went to Taiwan to develop his music career. He still performed a *capella* music when he could, but it didn't seem like a viable career path.

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Then, the 2008 global financial crisis hit. Peter returned to Singapore to regroup and decided to get serious about pursuing a *capella* full time. And that's how MICapella was born.

Peter Huang: So around about the time Glee was starting up as a TV show, and it's getting very popular and featured the Warblers, and I had heard that the recordings of that group of a *capella* singers have gotten to the point where the production really sounded sufficient in terms of the fullness, the overall compression quality, the technology of Auto-Tune and Melodyne at the time, was able to make things accurate enough. Because prior to that, a *capella* recordings were always commented on by my bosses at the Taiwanese record labels that the production quality was just not there, and I had to agree. But there was no way of fixing it because I didn't know who to go to and nobody had figured out how to do it. So the Warblers on Glee, were the first people to really get it done. So I knew it was possible.

And I was like, okay, they figured it out somewhere in the US, whoever these guys are. And if I could just do it in Mandarin and get this kind of production done, because I know that I can do the arrangement, I know that I can find the suitable singers. So I set out hunting for band members, on the premise that this band was to pursue a full-time career as touring performers, and eventually go from doing covers to creating our own originals.

But of course, to find that eventual produced sound took a while. So it took us two years to actually find out who these people were. So once I found out who they were, they were happy to have an Asian client for the first time who spoke English. And we've been working with them ever since. So this small community of a *capella*-specific editing, mixing and mastering engineers.

Hossan Leong: Why is it so important to record a *capella* performances in a specific way? Well, here's how Peter explains it.

Peter Huang: In the more conventional world of recordings, people would record voices as voices. And they would mix voices as voices, which are primarily used as lead instruments or harmony instruments. But they weren't really seen as something that could hold the pocket of a groove, or hold the drum line or the baseline.

So the fundamental difference is that these engineers would mic up voices as if they were instruments, they would treat the signal flow as if they were instruments and mix them accordingly. And not think of them as voices and just think of them as sounds to mould into the sonic role of the instruments without compromising the recognisability of the voices. Once you lose the recognisability of oh, this was done by a human voice and they missed the point of doing a *capella* per se, it still has to have that identifiability.

Hossan Leong: What does an a *capella*-specific production sound like? Here's MICapella's recording of the song *Remember*.

[Song excerpt]

Making a Scene: A Capella

Hossan Leong: With the technical aspects sorted, MICapella decided in 2012, to take part in The Sing-Off, a TV talent competition in China. They came in second and got a huge boost in their profile.

Peter Huang: We realised that the three months that we were away in China had created some form of fundamental change in opinion. As prior to Sing-Off, we were viewed as a subset of the choral scene. We were a miniaturised choir that did unusual repertoire. But The Sing-Off's portrayal of what our format was always more in line with how I saw ourselves and our industry. And we were finally seen as that. I realised that people have started to accept the format as a pop music format. So that was a fundamental shift.

Hossan Leong: From an obscure musical genre to becoming a part of mainstream pop, *a capella* in Singapore has come a long way since the 1980s. So what's next for this celebration of the human voice? Jason of In-A-Chord shares some thought-provoking reflections that we'll use as our final note for this episode.

Jason Ong: I think the *a capella* genre itself has reached kind of like a plateau. From back in the late 70s, early 70s to the early 2000s when people in America and Europe were beginning to experiment with vocal harmonies, very small groups, and then what I would term a revolution came about when these groups discovered, oh, we could also use our mouths to make percussion sounds and then the whole idea of vocal percussion and beat-boxing was born. It's like a quantum leap that brought the *a capella* genre to the next level.

I think since then there hasn't been anything like that, nothing quite so extraordinary. So, everything that has happened since then has been evolution, has been a refinement of techniques, mic-ing, of showmanship, of this, of that, but nothing, nothing quite as way out as wow, we have one, something that another facet to bring the whole *a capella* music back to its glory days.

So I think until that comes along, it may or may not, it really depends, right? Nobody knows. I'm a firm believer that we are humans and this is the human voice and the human voice is so flexible and so unique, that it can do so many things. Everybody's waiting for the next big thing, but nobody knows what it's going to be.

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