

Hitting a high note

By GRACE CHEN

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Choir's hard work adds to the festive cheer

BY THE time Christmas is over, the Dithyrambic Singers will have sung *Silent Night* no less than 15 times.

Soo Yi Yun, 18, who has been singing with the troupe since she was 14, finds performing this evergreen carol is always a challenge because of the need for a singer to sustain her breath at a high key during the slow tempo.

According to Ian Lim, the choir's artistic director and conductor, who is also an adjunct associate professor with the Institute of Music in UCSI University, the group's performances began in late November and will end tomorrow.

To-date, they have secured bookings to carol in seven shopping malls around Selangor and the Federal Territory, putting on between three and 10 performances in each location.

The choir, formed in 2005 after Lim's return from a teaching stint in the US, slotted in rehearsals for this year's Christmas carol project between an earlier gig in July, which saw them performing songs from *Final Fantasy* — a video game series — at the Petronas Philharmonic Concert Hall and *Carmen*, an upcoming opera scheduled for staging in early 2015.

Though a session only requires at most nine songs, Aris Lee, the choir president and project director, has required the members to stand by with 14, just in case.

Lim said all the hard work was not about making money.

"It began as an educational project. The sole aim was to share my overseas experiences with students and hopefully build a stronger interest in vocal performance with the public," said Lim, a former accountant who obtained his Master's in Music (Vocal Performance) from Southeastern Louisiana University, the US.

Having taught for a year at the Ponchatoula High School in Louisiana, Lim returned to teach at the Malaysian Institute of Art.

"If the Americans had one less vocal teacher, it wouldn't matter to them because there

were so many. But in Malaysia, the local opera scene was only found in the expatriate and Chinese community," recalled Lim.

Lim, then still a lecturer, gathered a group of 30 to 40 students from the three tertiary entities: MIA, University Malaya and Sedaya College (now UCSI). His requirements were simple — an decent voice, a strong interest in performing, the willingness to commit to rehearsals and the ability to work as a group.

Having secured the numbers, he began work on educating Malaysian students about Western opera.

Once he was done with the first part, he began to wonder what would come after. Realising it would be waste if the students didn't have an avenue to show off what they had learnt, he formed the choir to showcase his students abilities while teaching them about show business at the same time.

Members don't only sing. All have to chip in time for their share of administrative duties, like the drawing up of rehearsal rosters, for example.

Though passionate about his role as an educator, Lim revealed that working with young people was not always a bed of roses.

"There are times when I don't even have the strength to tell them to keep quiet," he said with a smile.

Lim has recently decided to leave much of the shepherding work to Lee.

The group also takes part in international choral competition, the first being the Voyage of Song event which took place in Shah Alam.

"We clinched the championship in the mixed-voice category. That gave us the confidence to go to the Hong Kong International Youth and Children's Choir Festival in 2006 where we won three golds and three silvers.

"By 2008, we were ready to take on the Asian Choir Games in Jakarta, Indonesia where we won a gold and silver," recalled Lim, who has taken the choir as far as South Korea to compete.

The last competition in 2009 in Jeju, South Korea, proved to be the most memorable. They did not make it to the competition because the entire troupe had to be quarantined after exposure to the H1N1 virus.

"It was the Indonesians who had come in contact with passengers carrying the virus during their flight. Though none of them displayed symptoms, our choir members who had come into contact with the Indonesians, contracted the virus.

"We were quarantined for nine days in a resort, with the sick being treated in isolated chalets. My phone was ringing like crazy as

concerned parents were anxious for updates," Lim said, adding that he finally returned with all safely accounted for.

As for the cost of hiring groups like the Dithyrambic Singers, local talent agents say contracts may start from RM800 per session

and go as high as RM5,000, depending on the choir's reputation.

"We give members an option to choose their performance schedules for Christmas carolling. Once the venues are confirmed, we will open it to the members to see on which dates they can perform.

"Transport is self-arranged and as each member is paid, we expect them to show up at least an hour before the performance to warm up. Over the years, we've had last-minute absences but as there are so many of us, we can always find replacements.

"If worse comes to worst, we'd just go on stage with one less member, but I'll make sure the irresponsible individual does not get off without an earful from me," said Lim.

In Malaysia opera choirs are still a niche endeavour.

"As Malaysia is still a developing country, its mentality is still entrenched in business endeavours where singing, especially in the niche area of opera choirs, has yet to be considered a real job compared to more stable occupations like law, engineering and

accountancy, for example.

"At present, 90% of the choir members are university students. They will only stay as long as three years before graduation, going overseas, work and marriage take priority in their lives.

"This is a pity because it means the singers will not have time to mature as a choir," he added.

However, Lim's aim is to nurture, not chase profit.

"Young people today are very different. Back then, if I was being taught French in order to learn a score, I'd be grateful for the new knowledge.

"Today, the young person will question why he has to go through the chore of learning a new language. To mediate the problem, explaining the 'why' can help. If they have the maturity, they will get it. If not, I'll leave it be.

"When they get to feel the music, when they get to learn new compositions, they will feel a sense of gratification. Once they do, it will spur the art to greater heights," said Lim.

As choir member Soo puts it, it is a foot in the door.

"We are here because we are ambitious. This is a chance for us to put our techniques to practical use, explore new avenues and make connections," she said.



Lively performance: The Dithyrambic Singers putting a bit of swing in their repertoire at a Christmas carolling session in a shopping mall last year.