

A close-up photograph of a man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark purple button-down shirt. He is smiling broadly, showing his teeth, and appears to be playing a piano. His hands are positioned over the keys, and the piano's control panel with various knobs and buttons is visible in the lower foreground. The background is softly blurred, showing what looks like a window with light coming through.

**ISKANDAR
ISMAIL**

**The Music
Man**

Monica Gwee

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ISMAIL
The Music Man**

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ISKANDAR ISMAIL

The Music Man

Monica Gwee



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Chapter

1

**ISKANDAR
ISMAIL'S
LEGACY**

The Man & His Music



Iskandar Mirza Ismail at The Arts House. As a composer, arranger, conductor, music director, producer and performer, Iskandar has shaped Singapore music for over three decades.

*“In many, not always visible ways, Iskandar has tried to explain being Singaporean to Singaporeans—and Singapore to a wider world.”
– Benson Pua*

GROWING UP, ISKANDAR MIRZA ISMAIL wanted to fly.

He was intrigued and obsessed by the intricacies of plane engines, so he thought he should be a pilot. He joined the Junior Flying Club. When it came time for the selection interview, Iskandar, famously laid-back and easy-going, was put through a simulated high-stress scenario to gauge his decision-making abilities under pressure.

Part of the testing involved close monitoring of a candidate’s heart rate under these stress-inducing circumstances. Iskandar’s heart rate remained normal. Too normal.

They flunked him.

The testers deduced that Iskandar Ismail was likely to take more risks than usual when confronted with crisis.

We will never know if the testers miscalculated Iskandar’s potential to be a pilot. But we do know that had he taken to the skies, a large part of Singapore’s musical landscape would be sorely missing.

As Iskandar celebrates his 57th birthday on July 23, 2013, our thanks go out to a humble heart monitor all those years ago.

Play your heart out, Iskandar.

COMPOSER, MUSIC DIRECTOR, MENTOR

AFTER MORE THAN 30 YEARS, Iskandar Ismail is widely regarded as one of the most important people in Singapore music. His track record as a composer, arranger, conductor, music director, producer and performer of some of Singapore's most recognisable songs bears no parallel. From his beginnings in the purist world of jazz to his widespread commercial success in pop and musical theatre, from his long-standing musical direction of the National Day Parades (NDP) to showcasing Singapore music on the international stage time and time again, Iskandar has surely made an indelible stamp on Singapore's musical heritage.

"In many, not always visible ways, Iskandar has tried to explain being Singaporean to Singaporeans—and Singapore to a wider world," says Benson Puah, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the Esplanade and the National Arts Council (NAC).

"You're talking about this tremendous person, this huge talent that even our highest accolades are insufficient to describe how valuable his talent is and how pervasive his work has been."

For artistic excellence in his musical contributions to the nation, Iskandar in 2008 was awarded the Cultural Medallion, Singapore's most prestigious arts award. In his letter of recommendation, Ivan Heng, the well-known theatre director and founding artistic director of W!LD RICE, wrote:

"He has created orchestral arrangements for almost every major musical, and has worked with practically every Singapore theatre company, both big and small...Iskandar's talents rank amongst the best in the world, and he has made an invaluable contribution to the development of music and the performing arts."

"He has contributed to the Singapore sound because he has a distinct style," confirms famed singer-songwriter and 2006 Cultural Medallion recipient Dick Lee of Iskandar's fusion music. "His arrangements are highly textured, full of colour and layers. I don't know how he does it. In a very simple arrangement, he would add a very complex flurry of flutes—and it would be effortless. And unexpected. His orchestrations are always beautiful."

It is perhaps Colin Goh, CEO of The Old Parliament House (TOPH), who sums up Iskandar's musical legacy best: "No one commands that sort of respect across the board, across all genres and generations."

RECURRING RELEVANCE

DESPITE ALL HIS ACHIEVEMENTS, ISKANDAR shows no sign of slowing down. In 2012 alone, Iskandar chalked up an impressive list of accomplishments that go to show his continued importance to Singapore music today: as a composer, music director and mentor.

In October 2008, Iskandar received the Cultural Medallion, the highest accolade in Singapore arts, from former President S R Nathan at the Istana.





As a composer, his original work for the cultural diplomacy programme Spotlight Singapore Young Entrepreneurs Series in Bratislava and Prague, an initiative of TOPH, received a rousing reception in Bratislava. His five-movement piece, *Living Dreams: A Concert Suite at Dawn*, debuted at the New Slovak National Theatre's Opera Hall in September to an audience of Slovak government officials, businessmen and Singaporean dignitaries, who greeted its world premiere with a standing ovation.

The Bratislava performance was in fact Iskandar's fourth involvement with Spotlight Singapore. He has created large-scale compositions for Spotlight Singapore's editions in Tokyo (2006), Moscow (2008) and Cape Town (2011), blending influences from various cultures with his own inimitable style to create rich and colourful musical textures and a unique idiom that crosses both popular and classical genres.

Because the projects provide him with the freest rein in terms of commissioned work, Iskandar's compositions for the Spotlight Singapore programmes can be seen as his most personal works. He is able to explore musical textures and orchestrations with an almost open brief beyond the parameters of showcasing Singapore creativity, allowing him to shift away from his more public work, such as music

for NDP or the Chingay Parade. Iskandar himself says, "Spotlight Singapore has brought me back to my composer's roots. The projects freed me and I have come full circle."

For 2012's Spotlight Singapore, Iskandar composed a folklore- and Slavic-influenced chamber work that explored the desires and dreams of a young generation confronted with multiple challenges. His musical suite featured Slovakia's Zobor band and vocalist Babula Volny collaborating with upcoming Singaporean talents like erhu player Tay Zhi Wen, percussionists Wong Hui Sian and Riduan Zalani, and flautist Rit Xu.

Accompanying the ensemble were more experienced musicians, including pianist Indra Ismail and cellist Natasha Liu. Iskandar wrote for these specific instrumentalists in mind, going so far as to create a drum segment especially for his favourite tabla player, M S Maniam.

"Writing for an audience in another country is always exciting, especially when it is for audiences and cultures which we seldom have contact with," says Iskandar of the culturally deep Bratislava. "Through the process, we always learn something new and we grow as artists."

"For *Living Dreams*, we see the Chinese flute in duet with the Slovakian flute, the fujara. One of the highlights was the finale ['Sunrise'] where I combined a Slovak folk song with the Malay *joget* rhythm."

Theatre director Jeremiah Choy, who directed *Living Dreams*, says that Iskandar's work was "truly evocative of the title. The music is very powerful and engaging, even on its own. We hope the mise en scene created through delightful music, enlightened staging and creative lights, will tell its own story, both musically and metaphorically."

Phan Ming Yen, former deputy CEO of TOPH, who collaborated closely with Iskandar on the Spotlight Singapore project, concurs. "Much of Iskandar's work on national platforms are designed as public spectacle. Typically, they involve digital wizardry or multimedia applications. There are stage theatre moments when you don't need much on the stage. We tried to do that with *Living Dreams*—to make the music stand for itself without other distractions."

It went down as a treat to an audience that included Singapore's Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sam Tan, Singapore's ambassador to Slovakia, Jennie Chua, and key government officials from Slovakia. "Iskandar's a genius," Phan stresses. "These were two very different cultures but there was no need for a shared spoken language. The music did it all. I believe he's the only one whose music can bridge these cultural divides with such accessibility. He integrated traditional and historical musical genres of their times, and bridged them with the contemporary music of today in a way that young people could appreciate. That is no small feat."

from left to right:

Iskandar won the prestigious Berita Harian Achiever of the Year Award in 2003. Bestowing the trophy upon him is Minister Yaacob Ibrahim, while former Berita Harian editor Mohd Guntor Sadali looks on.



For his outstanding contributions to music, Iskandar was presented with the COMPASS Artistic Excellence Award by former President Ong Teng Cheong in November 2000.

MR NATIONAL DAY

CLOSER TO HOME, ISKANDAR WAS once again the music director of the NDP. In 2012, Colonel Clifford Keong of the Singapore Armed Forces was appointed show chairman of NDP. He had the liberty to choose his “three wise men”—a creative director, technical director and music director—and went to past show chairmen to gather feedback. Iskandar, who had been the Parade’s music director between 1988 and 2008, was on break.

“Everyone still recommended him,” Col. Keong recalls. Iskandar’s fellow collaborator for NDP 2012 was another parade veteran from numerous Chingay festivals: choreographer and artistic producer of People’s Association Talents Fan Dong Kai.

“I told him, ‘Only you can help me because I need Western tap dance and Chinese opera with piano, and in-between, rap! And pipa and tabla too.’ He said: ‘Wah, so tough!’ but he made it. Only he can do it! Only he can give me that kind of beautiful, melodic, fusion sound,” Fan declares.

Together, they chose a form of street theatre and national pageantry for a parade that demands renewed audience engagement year after year. “Even today, after so many parades, I always get excited,” says Iskandar. “Every year, we have to try to make it as different as possible. It’s a collective effort, a collective of ideas,” he adds.

That year’s Parade was themed “Loving Singapore, Our Home”, and in the first act of the event, “Identity”, Iskandar conceived an enthralling dialogue between a tabla player, a gambus player, a Chinese opera singer and a pianist, reflecting the different strands of Singapore’s musical heritage.

Aside from composing, producing and arranging the music for the show, Iskandar also composed NDP 2012’s theme song, “Love at First Light”. The memorable anthem, which captures the spirit of Singapore, was performed as a duet between singer Olivia Ong, famous for the theme song to TV’s *The Little Nyonya*, and seven-year-old actress Natanya Tan. It was in fact Iskandar’s idea that a young girl be featured, a departure from previous Parades, to convey the innocence and hope of childhood.

In another segment of the show, Iskandar took a Bruno Mars hit song, “Count On Me” and combined it with the ubiquitous NDP song, “Count On Me Singapore”. The result was a catchy, localised, familiar yet fresh tune that connected immediately with the audience. That simple blending of the modern and traditional was painstakingly finessed in the studio.

“It’s a lot more work for him. I went to the Pavane Studio in Redhill with him often. He spent a lot of time perfecting the sound. Even a simple thing like pitch—he calls the musicians back to fine-tune it. He’s extremely meticulous because of his very sharp ear. I sat in for very long hours,” Col. Keong recalls.



Pop and classical music met for one night at the “SSO Goes Pop” concert in December 2000. Iskandar led the Singapore Symphony Orchestra while (from left) pop stars Tanya Chua and Mavis Hee were featured.

“Spotlight Singapore has brought me back to my composer’s roots. The projects freed me and I have come full circle” – Iskandar Ismail

“So much work—and it was just for the pre-parade segment! We hadn’t even gone into the main parade show yet!”

“No clear-minded person would want to do NDP over and over again!” Col. Keong says unreservedly. “A lot of pressure and expectations are associated with every Parade. I did one NDP and I’m tired! Just think how many Iskandar’s done. He doesn’t need to go through all of the pressure and the very, very long hours for what we pay. He just does it because it’s for Singapore. He’s got the passion.”

THE NEXT GENERATION

ANOTHER REASON FOR ISKANDAR’S SOFT spot for the NDP is the pool of young, talented performers he works with in every show. His unwavering dedication to nurturing the next generation of musical talents is best showcased at the children’s charity concert ChildAid, where he has served as music director for seven consecutive years. Organised by *The Straits Times* and *The Business Times*, ChildAid has raised \$5.86 million since its inception for *The Straits Times* School Pocket Money Fund and *The Business Times* Budding Artists Fund.

Iskandar got involved with ChildAid after the first concert in 2005. Peter Khoo, ChildAid’s chairman from 2005 to 2009, describes that debut effort as “a modest, staccato and simplistic affair. A performer came on and when he or she was done, another came on.”

After watching thoughtfully through the lineup of young performers, Iskandar leaned over to the organisers and said, “I want to chip in.” In Iskandar-speak, that meant something closer to a full-scale transformation of the ChildAid concert format and purpose.

Perhaps recalling his own musical start, Iskandar introduced professional details into the operational practices of ChildAid. Remarkably and delightfully for the young talents, many of them performing for the first time in their lives, he arranged for every soloist in the concerts to

from top to bottom:

Iskandar composed and arranged the score for a 140-piece orchestra for “Wonder Full”, a free nightly light and water spectacular at Marina Bay Sands. In 2012, “Wonder Full” won Best New Tourist Attraction at the 25th ASEANTA Awards for Excellence.



At the finale of the three-night ChildAid 2011 concert, ChildAid performers sang Iskandar’s composition “A World to Imagine” simultaneously with video footage of Japanese children singing Shigeru Yawata’s “Bridge Across the Sea”.





have individual dressing rooms—with their names on the doors.

In the lead-up to the concert, he also worked on the performers' scores painstakingly every night till the early hours, despite the fact that they were amateur musicians. As Khoo recalls, "Any other top musical director would say, 'Okay, I'll do this much and draw the line, after all they're just kids.' But not Iskandar. He treated these young talents with the same passion he would have if Yo-Yo Ma was playing!"

Iskandar's commitment to mentoring musicians extended to personal visits to children unable to make it to the audition venues. "We have driven to children's homes to audition them in their living rooms, or in their schools to see them," Khoo notes.

For ChildAid 2012 which was themed "Electric Edition", 210 youngsters took to the Marina Bay Sands Grand Theatre stage. Iskandar introduced new elements like the electronic violin and cello. Performances ranged from a band of Korean kids doing a rock version of Psy's "Gangnam Style" to YouTube stars rapping to original compositions, all accompanied by the 70-strong Orchestra of the Music Makers.

For a segment which featured three top young pianists from Singapore, Taiwan and Korea, Iskandar had the vision for three pianos on stage performing together with the orchestra—and to top it all off,

it was not just any three pianos, but three Steinway pianos. Iskandar refused to budge from his vision of providing the best instruments for these young talents, and the team with considerable difficulty finally managed to secure the loan of the three precious grand pianos.

Then came the issue of how to move the three pianos on stage during the live concert. It was decided that the pianos would rise from hydraulic bowels and be positioned in wait. But Iskandar worried that it was unceremonious for the magnificent pianos to pop up without due fanfare.

On the day of the concert, Iskandar decided to make a dramatic addition to the performance by writing a 68-second overture to accompany the stately appearance of the Steinways. Everyone objected. "He did it anyway," Goh remembers. "He composed the music right after he spoke to me at 6.30am, and the orchestra performed the overture on the night itself. It was just 68 seconds, but what a tremendous difference it made!"

As a testament to his steadfast commitment to new musical talents, ChildAid 2012 raised over \$2 million, a considerable increase from the \$300,000 raised in 2005.

But perhaps the best testimony comes from the young talents themselves. One of the talents who first came to attention at ChildAid is the vocalist Amni Musfirah, who was talent spotted by Iskandar himself during a ChildAid audition. Iskandar proceeded to take Amni under his wing, showcasing her abilities not only at ChildAid but also at the Asian Youth Games opening and closing ceremonies.

"It's so great to work with an icon," Amni attests. "For us music students, we get teary, because he's so big, yet he spends so much time with us. The way he treats us is so supportive. He's a really good teacher."

As Goh says, "Tell me, which other music director has given young talent so much exposure on a national platform?"

from left to right:

Held at the NUS Cultural Centre, ChildAid 2011 saw Iskandar serving as its artistic director for the sixth year running. The children's charity concert raised \$1.88 million.



Fireworks light up the Marina Bay skyline at the Youth Olympic Games 2010 closing ceremony. Iskandar was the music producer and director of the inaugural Games, which hosted 3,600 young athletes from around the world.

BATTLING THROUGH

AMAZINGLY, ISKANDAR ACHIEVED ALL THIS while fighting cancer. In 2010, he was diagnosed with lung cancer after serving as the music producer and director for the inaugural 2010 Youth Olympic Games' opening and closing ceremonies.

Despite his diagnosis, Iskandar today continues to work at a feverish pace. In fact, up till recently, only a few of his closest friends and collaborators were aware of his condition.

Looking back, has developing cancer made Iskandar more aware of the importance to share with the young and inspire the next generation? What has motivated and driven him over his three decades in the music business? And how has this kampong boy taken flight to become Singapore's very own music man?

Acknowledgments

One measure of a man's personal impact on his community is how the numerous people he has worked with throughout his career rally around him instantly in a tight spot.

Friends, business associates, members of the arts community and the extremely varied personalities who have worked with or known Iskandar throughout the years, including many who may not have seen him for some time—everyone approached—more or less dropped everything to contribute to this book. Because it was for their much loved friend Iskandar Ismail.

The huge respect and love Iskandar inspires among those whose lives he has touched, intersects many, many circles beyond the music and arts communities. He has shared his talent unstintingly throughout his career in remarkably diverse spheres. Even collaborators not in Singapore took pains and made the time to be included in this book to celebrate Iskandar's extraordinary life and talent.

Special thanks go to the often politically incorrect but fearless Kevin Nair, an early and perhaps, accidental Iskandar mentor, for his brutally honest insights. And to Benson Puah, in his role as chief of the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay and the National Arts Council, for many instances of private kindness and generosity.

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Most of all, to Iskandar's remarkable, talented and loving family, his amazing wife Erna, and children Emil and Valerie for their openness and candour.

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Iskandar Ismail has dedicated his life to pushing the boundaries and realising the possibilities of Singapore music, even as he has stayed resolutely behind the scenes. For the first time, get a rare insight into the man widely recognised as one of Singapore's foremost maestros. Composed of in-depth interviews and never-before-seen photographs, *Iskandar Ismail: The Music Man* delves into the triumphant, challenging but always tuneful journey of this Cultural Medallion recipient.

Experience the thrill of Iskandar's prodigious years at Berklee College of Music and on the vibrant club circuit. Celebrate his commercial hits with recording stars Dick Lee, Andy Lau and Sandy Lam. Tune into his arrangements for the musicals *Chang & Eng*, *Beauty World* and *Snow.Wolf.Lake*, and his original compositions for Spotlight Singapore and the National Day Parades. Learn how he overcame his cancer diagnosis to continue scoring international events like the Asian Games. As he finally steps out of the shadows, *Iskandar Ismail: The Music Man* looks back on the multiple facets of Iskandar Ismail's life and sings to his success.

